

RETRIBUTION



SUBJUGATION 8
BY FEL (JAMES GALLOWAY)

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Chapter 1

Kaira, 34 Hiraa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 26 October 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Kaira, 34 Hiraa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

KMS Tianne, orbiting Kosigi Lunar Station, Karis

Coma was actually in a bit of a funk.

It showed just how much powerful biogenic systems like the CBIMs and CBMOMs were truly alive, because they had genuine and sometimes uncontrollable emotional reactions. The simple truth was, Coma was mad at herself and a bit depressed over the fact that the refit of the *Tianne* had gone over time. Jason had wanted it done 26 days after they'd started, and today was day 27, with them not even being close to done.

But it was a good learning experience for her, both as a CBMOM in charge of her ship *and* as a living thing. She was learning that not everything went according to plan, that life took sadistic glee in throwing curve balls, and she was learning how to cope with that, both in a professional and a personal sense.

They certainly weren't behind schedule because of dallying. Virtually the entire technical and maintenance staff assigned to Kosigi was all over the ship, a large number of personnel from other services, like Bunvar's Civil Engineering teams and Army Special Maintenance, as well as several thousand of Cybi's maintenance bionoids, and they'd been working 29 hours a day, 10 days a takir since they began. Virtually anyone who knew how to use power tools had been pulled for this project. The simple fact of the matter was, just about everyone underestimated the scope of the project. Everyone, even Cybi, underestimated the time it would take to install the insulators that would prevent the IP waveform from bleeding into the

bulkheads and support spars, which had been the main reason they were off schedule. It had taken nearly a full takir longer to complete that phase of the project than expected, and because of that, they just didn't have the manpower to make up that time when it came to the much easier but much more tedious phase of the project, installing the waveform emitters.

So, they were in the first day of their project's overrun, and Coma was a little depressed about it. The new estimated time of completion was five days, and as Jason looked over the completion hologram, he saw that 89% of the ship's armor had had its emitters installed. They'd also done the work to put IP armor on the hangar doors, the blast doors, and even the porthole blast shields, and a little extra work had been added in to install IP armor on the *interior* blast doors in the major passages in the ship, mainly the central tram, which sealed off sections of the ship in case of a drastic emergency. Putting IP armor on the interior blast doors would make them exceptionally tough, able to withstand explosions inside a section or compartment and prevent it from boiling up and down the tramway and major crew companionways and potentially killing unarmored crew members.

What was going on here was currently going on just about *everywhere* in the Confederation, though other empires were a good month behind them. Fourteen days ago, they'd released the specs for the Confederation standard technology version of the IP armor system, and the other empires were just now starting to ramp up their planned refit schedules once they got the systems built. Kosigi was absolutely insane at the moment, since many of their allies were bringing their ships here so they could utilize the pressurized environment to speed up the refit process for their ships. Since the refit didn't really require a dock, there were ships just parked out in the dock areas, spilling over into the border areas between the assigned space of different empires, turning the interior of Kosigi into an obstacle course for just about any shuttle or zip ship trying to get around. Dellin and Cynna stood in the eye of that hurricane and managed it with incredible skill and savvy, making sure every piece of equipment found its way to its destination on time and undamaged, making sure that every ship either in a dock or out was exactly where it needed to be and knew exactly when it was going to move and where it was going to move to, which made just about everyone in the Confederation begin to truly appreciate just how good Dellin was at his job. Virtually no other major installation commander

would have been able to manage a logistical operation of this magnitude, keeping everything on schedule and running smoothly. Every dock master in Kosigi, no matter what empire they represented, would walk through fire for Admiral Dellin Karinne.

Despite being over time, they'd had no major issues, and what was most important to Jason, virtually everyone was *learning* from this. Engineering units from the Marines, Army, and even civilian divisions were learning how to install, operate, and maintain IP systems, and that would help when the time came that they started refitting exomechs, jumpers, corvettes, portable armor outpost sections, fixed armored positions, and other Army equipment to IP. Bunvar's people were learning the IP system for when they started installing it in civilian shelters and armored buildings and positions, like those around the strip, the White House, the Hall of Peace, the Shimmer Dome, and on Dahnai's island. And the entire experience itself was also a big continuous learning experience, as they came up with procedures, tested them, and found that some worked, and some didn't. The issue with the insulators was the perfect example, as they started with a process they thought would work but turned out to be very inefficient. So they scrapped it mid-operation and came up with a new idea, designed a new procedure, and that worked.

When the time came that they started refitting other ships, their experience with the *Tianne* would make those operations smooth, quick, and hopefully painless.

Jason wasn't there in person because they were over time. He was there because this was a scheduled inspection and visit that had been on the calendar for 15 days, and he wasn't about to change it just because it wasn't going to be him inspecting a completed ship.

[Buck up, soldier,] Jason consoled, looking over at Coma's hologram. He loved the fact that it wore Jyslin's face. *[This isn't your fault.]*

[It's my project. It's my responsibility,] she replied glumly.

[And what's the first rule of engineering, Coma?]

She gave him a grateful look. *[Nothing ever goes according to plan.]*

[Welcome to being a real engineer,] he told her, which made her laugh despite herself. *[Where are things at now?]*

[We should be finished in five days,] she answered, pointing to the hologram. [We've completed the conversion for nearly 90% of the hull, and all completed sections have been tested and approved. We'll be testing armor section 57B-416 in about two hours, once they complete the installation of the emitters in the last two decks of that section. Armor section 57B-418 should be the next section completed after that. So far, all tests are matching up with projections. The armor has very nearly the predicted field strength, with a 10,680% increase in armor integrity. We have only a variation of 20% compared to the engineering specs. The power distribution system and the phase matching system at the borders of different IP generator blocks are working as predicted, which means there is no loss in waveform power at the borders of the sections. That will give the system no weak points for an enemy to detect and exploit.]

[Any problems with radiative bleed from the waveform conduit?]

[No, the conduit insulators are working perfectly. We have only a .4% loss in signal strength between the IP generator and the emitter. That's impressively efficient.]

[And that also means that the surrounding systems aren't being affected by the interphasic field.]

[We had a couple of issues, but we fixed them with additional shielding,] she told him.

[How did the installation of IP on the interior blast doors go?]

[Surprisingly smooth,] she answered. [It only takes the Shield's Hammers about two hours to install localized IP on a blast door, and they've completed all but the last fifteen blast doors along the tramway. That part of the project should be complete tomorrow. And I'm glad Naval Engineering included that in the design. That will prevent any explosion that penetrates into the tramway from getting past the affected section.]

[Yeah, that could potentially cripple the ship,] he nodded, then smiled and held out his hand when Palla came onto the bridge. "There you are," he said to her as she stepped up and took his hand, then kissed him on the cheek. "And how many butts did you kick while you were gone?"

She laughed. "Only a few," she smiled. "What are you up to, Jason?"

“Coma’s giving me the rundown on where we stand,” he replied. “From the looks of it, we’ll be done in five days solid.”

“We shouldn’t have any more delays,” Coma said aloud. “At least I hope not.”

“You’re doing fine, Coma,” Jason assured her. “We’ve never done this before, so you’re the one that gets to test out what works and what doesn’t to make it easier for everyone else. Where are you on the installation write-ups for the other ship classes?”

“We’ve devised an installation procedure for all battleship classes and heavy cruisers,” she answered. “We’re currently working on carriers and Whales, since they share similar mission objectives, thus they share some design features.”

“Sounds good,” Jason said, looking at the progress hologram again. “What about cruisers and destroyers?”

“We’re running some simulations before we continue with those,” she answered. “Their smaller size will make some of the techniques we use on the larger ships not as effective.”

“Sounds reasonable,” he nodded. “How about the drive? Finish the last of the changes since Myli certified them?”

That had come down just two days ago. The translight drive was now *officially* certified for use. Myli had made a few minor changes when she published the final specs and certification paperwork, which all ships that already had drives installed had to follow, and that meant some minor refits and tweaks. Project F was in their post-operation phase now, mainly doing all the paperwork and finishing up the last little details before they officially cleaned out their warehouse, archived all prototype equipment and research, then disbanded as a project and reinstated as a department in the Science Division devoted to the further study and research of translight technology. The new department would have the mission of further refining and advancing the technology, making it faster, more efficient, smaller, with the ultimate goal of building a viable stand-alone translight drive that could be placed in a *fighter*. That version of the drive wouldn’t be capable of getting into hyperspace, but it would allow a fighter to vastly expand its operational range, even give it the ability to move from star system to star system.

Myleena was positive that they could do it, and Jason was fairly sure that they could as well. They just had to continue their research, miniaturize the drive, until they reached their goal.

But some of the Project F people wouldn't be going to the newly formed Department of Translight Applications, or the DTA. Myleena was taking about a quarter of her team over to Project H, the Nexus Bridge project, because they had scientific knowledge that would apply to that project. Their objective there was to research and advance nexus bridge technology with the ultimate goal of being able to build a nexus bridge in a gravity well. They may never get them to the point where they could put one on the surface of Karis but getting it to where they could put one in Kosigi would definitely be extremely useful.

To say that Jason was ecstatic about the drives being certified was the mother of all understatements. True, they were already installing them in all their ships, but now they were *official*. That meant that they were certain that the technology was sound, safe, and reliable, that the drives posed no danger to the crews or to the cosmic environment. The Karinnes could now move from galaxy to galaxy, in a way building the roads that everyone else would use to follow them as they got Stargates out there...at least those who acceded to the Karinnes' very stringent demands on how they behaved while out there in the universe.

And it also meant that in Jason's mind, the House of Karinne had *officially* entered the Intergalactic Age. It was almost a crazy thought, that they had the ability to travel between galaxies, that they could theoretically travel to the ends of the universe. He could only imagine what they were going to see, what they were going to discover out there. He'd actually stayed up at night trying to imagine what wonders might be out there, waiting for them to discover them, and he fully understood and even envied the Kimdori a little bit for their mad rush go to discover those things.

"We're holding off on the final refits so that those are finished just as the IP refit is complete," Coma answered. "The drive adjustments don't need to be made so long as the ship can't use its engines."

"Good point," Jason agreed with a nod. "So, since I don't have to kick any butts to get you girls moving, I'm not entirely sure why I came all the way out here," he smiled at Palla.

“Because you love us,” she replied, which made him chuckle.

“Well, let’s go take a look at an IP section just for the fun of it, then I’ll wander home. I want to be home to greet Aria.”

“She is such a precious little girl,” Palla said with a smile. “Isn’t this her last physical therapy session?”

“Yup,” he said with a bright smile. “That’s why I want to be home. We’re gonna take her to Samifra’s to celebrate.” Samifra’s was a restaurant not far from the house staffed by Shio chefs who could cook in about a hundred different traditions, and like most Shio restaurants, it was *awesome*.

Shio could *fucking cook*.

Palla laughed. “And won’t that mortally offend Ayama and Seido?”

“Even they deserve a day off from cooking from time to time,” he answered.

Palla and Coma joined him as he went down to the bow of the ship and toured one of the active refit areas, where hundreds of both living and bionoid workers quickly and efficiently installed emitters along the interior of the hull armor, a second team came along behind them and installed the power and dataline connections to the emitters, then a third team came along behind them and installed the protective outer housing and insulation to protect the emitter from damage and protect the rest of the ship from potential interphasic bleed. A Makati from the Shield’s Hammers was acting as the foreman for the section, overseeing all work and making sure to inspect the work to make sure everything was done exactly right. The locations of those emitters was *critical*, one even a couple of tikra out of place could produce a weak spot in the IP matrix that an enemy could exploit. And Jason had the feeling that when those Syndicate bastards came up against the *Tianne*, they’d be desperately searching for even the tiniest weakness in its defenses to try to stop it before it wiped them all out.

There was just no other way to say it. The *Tianne* was the most powerful ship ever built, at least to known Karinne science and history. It had overwhelming firepower, and when the IP refit was complete, it would be one of the toughest, most durable ships in the CCM. The ship only had one major weakness, the potential that an enemy might hit the GRAF

cannon while it was charged, and the crew was fully aware of that and took great pains to make sure that weakness was minimized.

And in just a few months, the *Tianne's* sister ship would be commissioned. As more and more maintenance bionoids were built that a CBIM could operate, the estimated completion time went down more and more. As it stood now, the ship would be finished well before the core crystal for the CBMOM was ready.

Jason finished his tour and went straight to the main landing bay holding the frigate *Javelin*, and he and Mikano chatted while the frigate took him home. He managed to get there a good hour before Aria would finish her final physical therapy session, which gave him time to go up to his home office and knock out a little paperwork. The other kids were in school, and in just three days, Aria would be joining them.

That was a bit of a surprise, but it was something they should have suspected given how she'd been taught her native language. It seemed that the Dreamers had a few tricks that weren't readily apparent, and one of them was going to help Aria *massively*. It turned out that Dreamers retained knowledge that was telepathically implanted much better than any other race, their brains were more accepting of implanted information and much more likely to treat it like any of their other long-term memories, which made it "permanent." Because of that, Songa had decided to implant Aria with the educational curriculum that would put her in grade 7, which was appropriate for her age. From there, she would receive the rest of her education the same way every other child did, in a school and in class, which would give her the chance to make friends and form important social bonds with other kids her age.

The other *little problem*, her stunted growth, that was being solved as well. Whatever Songa was doing, it was working, because Aria had grown an impressive 2.2 tikra just in the month she'd been with them, to the point where they had to take her shopping for new clothes yesterday. And those clothes would only fit her for maybe a couple of takirs, and she'd outgrow them as well. She was entering a medically induced growth spurt that would catch her up to where she should be developmentally, which would be just in time for the growth spurt awaiting her at the onset of puberty. Aria was

right on the edge of puberty, and Songa hoped that she could get most of her induced growth in before her puberty growth spurt started.

All in all, Jason felt it was one of the best decisions he'd ever made to adopt that little girl. Aria was a delight, sweet and loving and curious, so very curious, and she made their lives richer for being among them. Everyone adored her, particular Rann and Shya, who were her best friends, and she had found love and acceptance on the strip. She had loving parents in Jason and Jyslin, siblings in Rann, Shya, Bethany and Siyae, and the babies, and lots and lots of friends both inside and outside the strip. She was everyone's little sister or adopted daughter, and the last month had been one of the happiest of her life, or so she told them.

He didn't doubt her claim. Given how awful her life had been up to then, this had to be absolute heaven for her.

She hadn't expressed yet, but Jason was expecting that to happen literally any day now. Jyslin was already planning her passing party, and they were going to turn that into a big bash, because they'd decided that the day of her passing party would also *officially* become her birthday. They didn't know when that was, so they were going to just assign her one, and the best way to do it was to take a very important day in Faey culture, the passing party, a celebration of a child taking a big step towards adulthood, and more or less celebrate it yearly from then on.

The door opened, and to his surprise, Bethany waddled in, with Amber padding along behind her. Amber opened the door for her. "Daddy," she bubbled, and he picked her up when she came around the desk and put her hands out imperiously. "Wanna play?"

"I wish I could, little pip," he chuckled. "I'm getting some things done before we go out."

"Really? Where?"

"We're going to go to the restaurant," he answered as Amber jumped up onto the desk and sat down beside his panel. "Remember where you got that pie you really liked? That's where we're going."

"Can we go play after?"

“It’s gonna be a little close to your bedtime,” he told her, putting an arm around her as she leaned back against him.

“Aww!”

He looked at the hologram projecting out over his panel, just another boring report, then snorted and shut it off. “I agree. I’d rather be playing with you than doing this,” he told her, standing up and shifting her to a more comfortable position in his arms.

So, Jason spent quite a pleasant hour down in the living room playing with his girls and had so much fun that he was honestly surprised when Jyslin came into the living room with Aria in tow. The little girl rushed in with a laugh and jumped on top of him as he lay on the floor, nearly landing on Siyae, showing that a month of physical therapy and constant exercise had done wonders for her. She still couldn’t run very fast or very long, but she could easily walk a good distance and engage in moderate physical activity. She’d just get stronger and stronger from here out. “Hello, my little treasure!” he told her brightly. “How was your last session?”

“It wasn’t bad,” she replied. “I’m only a little tired. I still have to go for my appointments with Doctor Melari, but those aren’t that bad.” Melari was her primary psychiatrist, who was going to help her get over the trauma she’d suffered through most of her life. “Pamma said we’re going out tonight?”

“Yes we are, we have to celebrate you finishing your therapy,” he smiled, putting his hands under her arms and pushing her out to arms’ length. “We’re going out to Samifra’s.”

“I like that place!” she said with a smile.

“That’s why we’re going there, silly,” Jyslin said with a smile down at them, then she picked up Bethany. “Hello, baby girl. How are you doing?”

“Mama! We playing wrestle!” she answered. “Daddy cheats!”

“Yes he does,” Jyslin laughed in agreement.

“When are we leaving?” Aria asked.

“When Rann and Shya get home from school, so we have a little bit,” he answered. “You wanna go out to the beach?”

“Yes!” she said eagerly. Aria *loved* the beach.

“Then go get ready,” he said, pushing her out and up onto her feet.

“And no suit!” Jyslin barked as she ran for the stairs.

[Leave her alone, I like her just the way she is,] Jason teased.

[Oh hush you,] she replied, her strength rippling within her thought, as if she had trouble containing it. Becoming a Generation had had some noticeable effects on Jyslin, and the increase in her strength was just one of them. Jyslin had been in the top tier before, but now she was *frighteningly* strong, stronger than he was, stronger than Yana, very nearly on par with Myleena. She was now the documented third most powerful telepath alive by Karinne science, with only Myleena and Saelle beating her...and Saelle only *barely* beating her. The retrovirus that made her a Generation had built on that impressive base and produced one of the most powerful telepaths alive. She was so powerful that she had to take lessons with Ryn to learn how to control it, it was so much that she was having control issues.

It showed why females were the dominant gender among the Faey, because of their telepathy. The fact that Jyslin was female had made it almost guaranteed that she’d be stronger than he was in telepathy now that the fact that he was a Generation and she wasn’t was taken off the scales. But nobody, not even Zaa, had expected her power to increase by an order of magnitude once she fully settled into her new power.

And if that wasn’t enough, that bitch was an even stronger TK than *he* was. She could lift nearly 95 konn without a gestalt, which was more than she weighed...she could literally levitate with her TK. With her worn gestalt, she could pick up nearly 300 konn, which was far more than he could. With the tactical gestalt in the basement, she could pick up nearly 1,200 konn. That was enough to pick up a hovercar. Jason was almost afraid of just what she could do if she was merged to something like a CBIM.

And *damn* was Dahnai ever pissed off about that. Jyslin was stronger than *she* was in TK, and Dahnai was a TK before she became a Generation. Becoming one had increased her telekinetic ability, as Jason suspected, but not by very much. She was able to pick up about 10 konn more in weight now than before, which was still pretty impressive. But no matter how

impressive her power was, the fact that Jyslin was better than her at something just burned her up.

Damn Faey and their ultra-competitive natures.

They took Aria and the girls down to the beach, having to take a moment to appreciate his wife's gorgeous nude body a moment as they settled on a towel. Jyslin naturally chided Aria for coming down in a bathing suit, and managed to talk her into taking it off, to get her acclimated to nudity. And while Jyslin took Aria down to the water and played in the surf with her, he considered the last couple of takirs where she and Dahnai were concerned. The two of them were doing very well in their lessons. Jyslin had picked up splitting quickly, and now Jason and Myleena were training them in some of the finer points of using a gestalt. Both of them were also starting to take lessons from Samin to develop their telekinetic ability, and there was no better qualified a teacher...except maybe a Pai. And in that respect, there hadn't been any trouble. The day after coming back from Kimdori Prime, Jyslin had went to Ayuma, and as far as everyone was told or knew, had started doing the exercises that Ayuma used to coax Shya's telekinetic ability out of her. Nobody was surprised at all when that supposedly succeeded, because it was *Jyslin*, so there was no need to really explain her newfound telekinetic ability.

It even produced something of a shocking surprise. A few of the girls had professed an interest in doing the same thing, seeing if they had any latent ability, and much to everyone's surprise, it turned out that both Yana and *Sheleese* had latent telekinetic ability. In Yana's case, her telepathy was so powerful, nobody was all that surprised, but everyone was a bit surprised that her TK had never been brought out, given how much attention and training she'd gotten due to her telepathy...at least to a casual observer. It made sense to Jason, because he *knew* Yana, and knew what she went through as a child because of her power. She'd hated all the attention and the questions and the tests and exercises, which explained her introverted personality today. She'd probably buried her latent TK out of fear that it would put even more attention and pressure on her.

In Sheleese's case, it was definitely a surprise...but it shouldn't be. Sheleese was a strong telepath, as any Imperial Marine would be, but she was so much of a goofball that it should be no surprise that she'd never

really buckled down and did the hard work required to try to find her latent telekinetic ability.

Both of them were much more representative of a Faey, because neither of them were anywhere near as strong as a Generation. Yana could lift about 15 konn, which was close to the top tier for Faey TKs, and Sheleese could lift about 4 konn. That was still above average for Faey telekinetics, but much more mainstream for those that could move more than a feather with their power.

So, because of Yana and Sheleese, Jyslin's supposed revelation really wasn't that big a deal, because she wasn't the only strip girl that turned out to be a TK. Yana and Sheleese provided the perfect cover, and also meant that Jyslin didn't need to hide it the way Jason felt she would at first.

Over at the summer palace, things were just as busy. Dahnai, Kellin, and Sirri were still in training, though they were almost finished with the basics. However, they wouldn't be going back to Draconis for nearly a month, mainly because the throne room and her apartment were torn up at the moment, in the middle of a renovation. They'd expected the war to last much longer than it did, so Dahnai was "stuck" in the summer palace while the maintenance people put her palace back together. She certainly wasn't complaining, and neither was the *Siann*. Dahnai had been holding full court on her island the last couple of takirs, once she fully recovered from her transplant, and the Grand Duchesses loved to come to Karis as much as Dahnai did. The Imperial family went through the motions in public, but once the *Siann* went back home, they got down to the business of training. Sirri was the busiest, taking lessons in telepathy and TK in the morning, then doing exomech training in the afternoon. And like Jason, she *loved* it. She was even professing an interest in being just like Jason and getting her combat rating for a rig when she grew up, fighting side by side with her army like the warrior queens of old in Faey history. She was so eager to learn that she had already completed the first phase of exomech training, basic control and operations, and was beginning the second phase, which was advanced operations and basic combat training. She was starting on a Gladiator and had already declared that she was going to rate on *every* exomech in both the IAS and KAS inventories, including a Titan.

He'd let her try. If she could pull that off, get a combat rating on a Titan, he'd throw her a party. Hell, he'd give her a Titan of her own.

Dahnai was actually behind her daughter when it came to exomech training. She was learning because she had to learn, but outside of finding it fun, an enjoyable diversion and even a little interesting, she didn't love it the way Sirri did. Sirri was literally spending every spare moment she had in a merge pod, pestering Saelle, the Imperial guard attachment at the Summer Palace, and Jason's Imperial guard detachment to teach her more, teach her more, teach her more.

Sirri was the main one responsible for Jason deciding to expand his gift to the Imperial Guard, in the form of Titans. He originally didn't intend to give them Titans, but Sirri literally talked him into it...mainly so she could learn to pilot a Titan herself, so she'd have some right there on the island to use. So, once the Imperial Guard detachment to the Summer Palace finished rating on Gladiators and Juggernauts, they'd begin Titan training. And *that* was what most of them were most eagerly awaiting.

Sirri was born to be a rigger, it seemed. It was almost a shame that she was the Crown Princess.

The funny one was Kellin. He was doing fairly well in his exomech training, but he showed the typical mindset of a Faey male when it came to the fighting part, tentative, and maybe even a little cowardly. He was like a human girl in that regard, found combat operations to be against everything he was taught and believed in, and as a result, he was terrible at it. Faey men weren't used to fighting, didn't like to fight, were even afraid of it. They were used to being protected by the women, living in a society where their personal safety was never threatened, where a woman would never raise a hand against him no matter how mad she was at him, so they were not used to protecting themselves. And when it came to two males being mad at each other, they settled those disputes with schemes, not fists, which was how they earned the reputation that Faey men were cunning, spiteful, vicious bastards when they were wronged.

In that respect, Jenn was very much an outlier among his Faey brothers, because not only did he love to fight, he was a *monster* in an exomech. His scores were so high that if he wasn't a Generation, any company commander would take one look at them and snap him up in a heartbeat.

Kellin impressed in his own way, and that was his TK. Dahnai was almost relieved that he wasn't stronger than she was, but it was pretty close. He had developed some impressive telekinetic ability, able to lift about 20 konn without a gestalt. But unlike Jyslin, it had already been decided that he would need to keep his secret, at least for now. And in a way, it was the smart thing to do. If nobody knew what he could do, they wouldn't expect it if Kellin ever found himself under attack.

That wasn't unheard of in Faey history. The husband and the *amu* of an Empress had been assassinated far more than the Empress, so Kellin having that ace up his sleeve was going to keep him nice and safe. Once he learned how to warp space, he'd have an extremely powerful defense.

Closer to home, Shya was well ahead of schedule herself, and that was mainly due to Rann. Rann had taken it on himself to teach Shya everything there was to know about being a Generation, and to his credit, he had taught her well. She had mastered splitting, merging, and some of the advanced communing techniques already, and like her mother, she was learning the advanced TK techniques that Rann had already learned. But, Shya showed that not all of them had been affected the same way, because her telekinetic ability hadn't increased from her becoming a Generation. It was the same strength as before, though now she had the ability to boost it with a gestalt.

So, thus far, having the Imperial Family as Generations had caused no problems...and he prayed that it stayed that way.

But at least he got something out of it. Since Jason sent the Imperial guard KMS exomechs, Dahnai decided to return the favor, in the form of the twenty Knight exomechs, ten Army and ten Imperial Marine variants, which were more adapted to space-based operations, up at Joint Base Alpha. Jason had already started working to rate on one in his spare time, and he could admit that he was impressed. The Faey were actually very good at designing and building exomechs, and they'd designed a mecha that embodied their concept of warfare. Knights were fast, agile, and nimble, had just enough armor to withstand a few direct hits without the armor's weight slowing the mecha down, and they were heavily armed. And in the case of a Knight, that made them some pretty formidable machines. A Knight stood toe to toe with a Gladiator in its performance ratings, a little

larger than a Gladiator, not quite as heavily armored, and nearly as fast because of that sleeker frame and lighter weight.

At Sioa's insistence, Jason had one of each of the variants at the research hangar of Army Special Maintenance, and no doubt by now, they'd been taken apart and put back together about ten times. They were studying them to see if they could adapt them to Karinne technology the way they did Raptors, because Sioa saw a use for Knights in the Karinne Army inventory filling the role between a Gladiator and a Juggernaut, when a mission needed more firepower than Gladiators could provide but still needed speed. A Knight would fill that role perfectly. Wolf fighters may be better, but that in no way meant that Raptors were obsolete. The KMS still used Raptors, mainly for planetary defense. Their smaller and more aerodynamic profile made them even more nimble in an atmosphere than a Wolf.

Dahnai knew what he was doing. And far from being mad, she found it a point of personal pride that the *Karinnes* were seriously considering buying exomechs from the *Imperium*. That told the entire Confederation just how good Knight exomechs were. She'd been quite happy to sell them Raptors, and she would be just as happy to sell them Knights.

Things were looking promising, both out there and right here. He watched Jyslin and Aria frolic in the waves, his eyes more focused on Jyslin's sexy body than anything else, and he couldn't help but feel...*happy*.

And standing not far from him was what he hoped was a good omen. A blue-skinned Faey and a mocha-skinned Dreamer standing together in the surf, a sight he hoped to see much more frequently in a few months. That skin difference made the two of them striking together, but beyond that minor difference were two of the same species. The Dreamers were Faey, and the Faey were Dreamers, and Jason was going to free the kin of his wife and *amu*—*his* kin if he wanted to get technical, since he had a Faey ancestor—from the horrific torment and bondage they were suffering under the rule of the Syndicate.

"I wish I could swim in the ocean," Aria fretted as she let a wave swirl around her legs.

“Soon, pippy, soon,” Jyslin smiled down at her. “Songa said you have to exercise a little more before you’re ready for the ocean. Until then, the pool is going to have to do.”

“It doesn’t look as much fun,” she noted.

“I prefer the pool if I want to swim. The ocean’s only good for this,” Jyslin grinned, leaning down and slapping a breaking wave, sending the water at Aria. She flinched and laughed, then tried to retaliate in kind. Jason watched as the two of them splashed each other, then laughed himself when Aria lost her footing and fell, dunking herself. Jyslin helped her back to her feet, then flinched when Aria spewed a mouthful of water right at her face.

Now *that* was sneaky. That proved that Aria was every bit a Faey.

He watched the two of them for a little while, at least until Rann and Shya came out and sat on the beach blanket beside him. They were no longer wearing armor to school, so they were both wearing their school uniforms. *[Hey guys, how was school?]*

[Boring,] Shya replied, leaning back on her hands. *[They keep going over stuff I already know.]*

[Blame all those Imperial tutors for you being ahead of the class,] Jason told her. *[I told you that you can advance up to where it’s not boring.]*

[And leave Ranny behind? No way!] she protested.

[Then stop complaining, you made that choice, so live with it with some dignity,] he grinned down at her.

[Why do I put up with you, Dad?] she accused. *[You’re so mean!]*

[Because you like to eat food and sleep in a bed with a roof over it,] he replied dryly, which made Jyslin sputter and laugh over at the surf line.

[I could live by myself!]

[Yes, by yourself. Rann stays here.]

[Jerk,] she fumed, crossing her arms over her school blazer and looking away.

[All day every day,] he affirmed shamelessly.

“Hey guys!” Aria called, waving at them. “I didn’t see you come home!”

“We just got here,” Rann answered. “How was therapy?”

“All done!” she exclaimed happily. “Doc Songa said I can get better without needing therapy now!”

“Yup, she’ll get stronger doing what she’s supposed to do, play,” Jason nodded. “Give her another month or so, and she’ll be able to run as fast as Aran. Maybe even faster.”

“Awesome, Ari!” Shya called. Why Rann and Shya saw the need to make her name even shorter was beyond Jason. But then again, Rann called Shya *Shy*, as if just adding that *a* was too much for him.

“We’re going to Samifra’s tonight to celebrate her getting off therapy,” Jason told them.

“Oh cool. I like their food, it’s almost as good as home,” Rann said. “Just different enough to be cool.”

“And how much did Ayama pay you to say that?” Jason asked.

“She gives us cookies if we say nice things,” Rann grinned at him.

“You learn fast, son,” Jason said, which made both of them laugh. “We’re going out as much to give Ayama and Seido a night off as anything else. They’ve both worked a ton since Aria came, due to them having to make food just for her.”

“I take it that’s done too?” Shya asked.

“More or less. She has to take those vitamins and medicine Songa prescribed, but she doesn’t need specially prepared food anymore.”

“I tried her food, it didn’t taste any different,” Rann mused.

“That’s not what made it different, silly,” Jason chided as Jyslin and Aria came up to the blanket.

“You two are way too dressed to be on the beach,” Jyslin told the kids.

“We just got home,” Rann protested, patting his uniform blazer.

“Well, get proper or go back inside,” Jyslin demanded. “I won’t have my kids embarrassing me like this on the beach!”

Only in the Imperium would a mother complain that her son was embarrassing her by *not* being naked. And only in the Imperium would said kids be so quick to strip naked in public, folding their uniforms and setting them on the corner of the blanket. But Jason couldn’t really say that he minded too much anymore. If anything, it always gave him something *very* nice to look at when Jyslin and the strip girls were down on the beach.

Tim may be the shameless horndog on the strip, but Jason had too many kids to say that he was clinging to his Terran morality.

Because school was out, the beach quickly populated with the older kids, and then the younger ones when Maya brought them out to play, and quickly the beach around Jason’s house was filled with naked kids, a whole lot of laughter, and a feeling to Jason that this was what life was all about. He and Jyslin sat on the blanket and watched the kids playing, under the watchful eye of Maya, her staff of nannies, and the guards to ensure nobody got into any trouble or danger out in the water, but Jason was watching Aria. She was all but surrounded by the older kids, the center of attention, and she seemed entirely comfortable on that pedestal now that she’d gotten to know everyone. This was what had been denied her, a chance to just *be*, and Jason was happy to see that she was acclimating very well to her new life, her reward for her courage.

Jyslin leaned against him a little bit, her arm around him and her hand coming to rest over the *jaingi* on his shoulder. [*I love you,*] she communed, her thought simple, pure, heartfelt, and it never failed to move him.

[*I’m glad,*] he answered, kissing her on the cheek. She’d have none of *that*, and before he knew it, she had him pushed down on the blanket and kissing *far* more properly...maybe a bit too properly for him to feel entirely comfortable being in public. Jyslin slid her hand down his stomach, the gave a little giggle against his lips when her hand ran out of room. [*Uh oh, Jason’s about to show the kids why he’s so popular with the grown women,*] she teased naughtily.

[*That’s your fault, woman,*] he accused.

[Stop being silly. As if they haven't seen a hard dick before. They see it often enough on viddy.]

[Viddy isn't live. Those actors aren't me,] he pointed out.

[Sometimes I don't know if your modesty either drives me crazy or turns me on. Maybe both,] she purred, doing something that no woman would ever dare do in public on Terra. Some may not even dare do it in private.

[Stop being Kumi,] he accused, which made her laugh against his lips.

[Mmm, one thing's for sure. We'll take the kids to Samifra's after we're done.]

[I don't object to that.]

So, they were a little late getting the kids dressed and on their way to Samifra's, and Jason was almost giddy that he wasn't in armor, and they took a hovercar instead of a frigate. Aya had fully lifted her restrictions, and while there was a detachment of guards along with them, they weren't acting like the entire universe was trying to kill him. Only two came into the restaurant, standing unobtrusively near the door, while the other two kept an eye on things outside the building. The restaurant was close enough to the strip for Jason and his family to not attract too much attention, frequented by Generations and upper government officials that lived in the neighborhood, and they enjoyed a delicious, filling meal as they just enjoyed a nice evening in each other's company.

The work started after he got home. Due to the large time difference between Karis and Kimdori Prime, his scheduled meeting with Zaa took place late for him and early for her, so neither of them had to wake up in the middle of the night. They met in Nexus One, in a conference room that Miaari's people had converted into a high security briefing area. Jason got there by corvette, but Zaa got there by using the bridge, which made her arrival much, much cooler than his. They had a lot to talk about, so they didn't waste any time. They started with an update on the status of the Syndicate fleet and crews that they'd captured, which was old news for Jason. The Syndicate crews had finished their exodus to Q3XD-19, and thus far, they'd caused no trouble. They'd segregated the crews by putting the Benga on one side of the island and most of the other races on the other, with the excuse of preventing any Benga from accidentally kicking

someone and hurting them. The real reason was to protect the other races from the Benga, and also to see how loyal they were to the Syndicate if there weren't Benga literally looming over them to keep them in line. They'd set up logistics to keep the prisoners well fed and see to their basic needs, but not put them in the lap of luxury. Their camps on the island were functional, but lacked things like air conditioning, so they weren't exactly luxurious. There were four other camps on the planet that catered to the environmental requirements of races aboard the ships, from a camp near the planet's pole for two separate races that preferred near-arctic conditions to an undersea complex for three different aquatic or amphibious species. All of them shared the same basic conditions at their camps; sturdy shelter, plentiful food, but nothing luxurious. And true to their word, the Syndicate crews were left alone, to do as they pleased with what they brought with them until such time that they could be returned home. There was not a single Confederation soldier anywhere on the planet, and drones delivered a camp's daily supplies.

That didn't mean that there weren't outsiders in those camps. Zaa had quite a few infiltrators in the camps to gather information, and that was the next part of the briefing. Zaa's newly appointed Gamekeeper for the prison planet came in and gave them an in-depth briefing about everything her pack had learned from the Syndicate crews, from technical data about their technology to social conventions among the various races that made up the crews...some 792 different species. And the unifying theme of almost every species' culture was fear. Fear of the Syndicate, fear of the megacorps, and resignation that there was simply nothing to be done about it. Much as Jason had begun in the subjugation as an unwilling student, doing the bidding of the Faey but objecting to them and their system, many of the species on that planet hated the Syndicate, but felt powerless to do anything about it. So, they made their way as best they could for themselves and their families, just trying to make a decent life for themselves.

Jason could understand that kind of cynical resignation. He'd seen it among his own people when the Faey took over Terra.

After the briefing about Q3XD-19, another newly appointed Gamekeeper gave them another briefing. This was the Gamekeeper for E Chaio, and because of the importance of that post, only a truly exceptional Kimdori was going to do it. The only other living Handservant to Zaa,

Kraal, stepped into the room. He was exactly as Jason remembered him, insanely tall and burly and handsome in the Kimdori way, his jet-black fur dominated by the white bar going down the center of his torso. “Kraal,” Jason said in a bit of surprise. “I didn’t know you were transferred from your post with the Skaa.”

“Denmother felt I was needed for this new post,” he replied modestly, nodding towards her. “She was gracious enough to install another of the Shevks into my old post, a very promising Kimdori lieutenant from my office.”

“I would entrust a territory like E Chaio to none other but a Handservant,” she affirmed with a nod. “And I agree, Genth was the best choice to take your place on Skaa.”

“Well, it’s good to see you again,” Jason told him. “Did you enjoy that book?”

“It was quite intriguing, Jason, thank you. I enjoyed it immensely,” he replied. Jason had kept in contact with Kraal over the last couple of years, mainly out of curiosity about the only other Handservant. And he was every bit as intelligent and formidable as both Zaa and Miaari boasted. Jason had no doubt that he would be running E Chaio from the shadows inside a year, given that his role as Gamekeeper in enemy territory was about much more than gathering information. If Zaa ordered any operations on E Chaio, like assassinations or sabotage, Kraal would carry them out. Much like Jinaami had been the one to go after the IBI when they went rogue against Dahnai with that cloning scheme, Kraal would be the one to pull the strings and light the fuses when the Kimdori started taking direct action against the Syndicate’s capitol planet.

“What do you have to report, Handgroom?” Zaa demanded.

“I’ve begun consolidating the assets planted on E Chaio and have begun building an operation, Denmother, your Grace,” he replied. “This includes identifying and recruiting local talent. I have also been bringing in packmates, the best in the clan at what they do given where they will be operating, to reinforce the Kimdori already there. I’ve identified and moved to procure a base of operations, and I was told that you will be able to get

me there using this most useful machine,” he said, motioning at the bulkhead.

“We have a beacon on E Chaio,” Denmother told Jason.

“I should have my headquarters set up and ready to begin operations by the start of next takir,” he reported. “That are the future plans. Now let me brief you on what we have already learned.”

And Kraal was *thorough*. He had just been appointed to this new post two days ago, but he knew every single scrap of information that the Kimdori already there had gathered, from big things like the names of the members of the Board to things like the name of the seedy dive where one of the minor executives in one of the megacorps frequented. He presented it to them in a concise and logical manner that allowed him to go over a large amount of information quickly, yet still give them quite a few details. He took them through the structure of the Syndicate’s oligarchy, and then highlighted the different corporate cultures within the megacorps. They weren’t all the same, but all of them shared a similar ruthlessness, both to those outside and to those within. *Termination* was a *literal* word when it came to being “fired” from a megacorp, at least for executives.

He then went over the culture of the planet of E Chaio, which existed in a state of duality. There was the opulence, the splendor of the executives who ran the megacorps and by extension the entire government, of palaces the size of small towns and glittering towers clad in precious metals reaching high into the sky. And then there was the underworld, where the poor, the servants, the small timers and the people who supported them lived. And that term was also literal. E Chaio was like the Skaa homeworld, it had a world above ground and a world below. The poor and the infrastructure that supported them was literally underground in the major “cities” on E Chaio, where a “city” was defined as the area around one of the main headquarter complexes of one of the ruling megacorps. There were 163 major population centers on the planet, each one surrounding an HQ and the main bureaucratic centers of the Syndicate’s government. The “ugliness” of the common man and his houses and shops were kept out of sight of the executives those workers supported, and as a result there was a maze of used and unused passages, tunnels, caverns, and galleries under the artificial surface of the planet’s major population centers. The “ground

level” of the planet wasn’t even on the ground. Like many ancient cities, they had built on the platform of prior construction, and as a result, the “ground” of E Chaio was synthetic with the actual ground hundreds of shakra under it, and the volume between them filled with the constructions of the past that the Syndicate had paved over again and again and again. Out away from the “cities,” out where there the last of the active industry existed on the planet, the buildings were old, run down, and the homes of those who eked out an existence either on the lowest rungs of the social ladder or on the fringes of Syndicate society. These working-class districts were like slums, large swaths of hungry, downtrodden masses living on the edges of over the top gilded splendor.

The industry on E Chaio wasn’t quite what one would expect. The planet’s industry existed for the sole reason to support the planet itself, factories that fashioned the materials for building, produced goods used by the residents, and so on. E Chaio was a city that covered an entire planet, and that required a lot of maintenance, and that was what the industry on E Chaio produced.

“This is where I will set up my base of operations,” Kraal reported, showing them a hologram of a run-down section of the planet about halfway between the “city” holding the seat of political power for the Syndicate and a “city” around one of their megacorp HQs. “This is known as the Baka District, devoted to the production of their version of plascrete. The geographical location is ideal, giving us quick and easy access to four of the planet’s major cities, the closest of which is their capitol area. The Kimdori already there have managed to buy this closed factory,” he said as a picture of it appeared. “And this will be my office there. The factory has quite a bit of space, it sits on a juncture between four different major underground tunnel systems that reach into the four cities within its range, giving us a hidden and secure means to move back and forth. These tunnels are all abandoned parts of a subterranean mass transit system that existed on the planet centuries ago, with large galleries built along them where population centers of common workers lived. That gives us a large amount of space to store equipment and supplies outside of the Syndicate’s knowledge. And what is most important, the factory used to produce high grade metal support beams and other building materials, and the residue left behind from decades of operation creates a structure that interferes with

Syndicate sensors. They already know this, so they will not be alarmed after we install our SCM equipment and their sensor sweeps will not penetrate the structure.”

“A wise choice in locations,” Zaa approved.

Kraal gave a modest nod. “Our people on E Chaio have already begun preparing the factory. To maintain our deception, they are going to renovate it and begin producing decorative crystal cladding and other glasswares,” he told them.

“Kraal, how can you go in and set up a business when every citizen in the Syndicate is basically owned by a megacorp?” Jason asked curiously.

“Sponsorship, your Grace,” he answered. “A lay employee of a megacorp can petition it for permission to become what they call an agent. That is an entrepreneur. These agents set up small businesses meant to produce goods or provide services in a local area, in Terran terms, a *mom and pop shop*. The megacorp actually owns the business the agent sets up, but the agent is given operational control and is awarded a portion of its profits, in effect earning his pay based on commission, on the success of the business he builds and operates. Many of a megacorp’s minor executives begin as agents, proving their business skills on a small scale. What we have done is forged an identity of a common citizen in one of the megacorps, Tricor Industries. That is the megacorp our computer specialists have managed to break into,” he explained. “They set up a false identity and an agent sponsorship program for that identity and bought the factory under those credentials. We will be ‘paying’ Tricor a portion of our profits once the factory’s production begins to maintain the deception, so their auditors do not get curious. Using this sponsorship, it will give us the ability to make business contacts among other sponsored businesses and give us a way to be visible on E Chaio without looking out of place. I will be a humble agent, who has convinced his megacorp to sponsor my idea of buying an old abandoned factory and turning it into a decorative glassware company. And on E Chaio, a business like that is a sound venture. The executives adore anything flashy and gaudy, and crystal cladding defines gaudy.”

“Ah. Very clever, Kraal,” Jason nodded.

“Thank you, your Grace,” Kraal said with a smile. “We should have most of our operation set up by the beginning of the new Faey year,” he reported. “And once we have a base of operations, we should be greatly expanding our intelligence gathering capabilities, as well as giving us a base of support from which we can undertake local operations.”

Kraal moved into another subject, one that had Jason’s interest...the Board’s reaction to the defeat of their invasion fleet. They actually didn’t know their fleet had been defeated, because of the tachyon burst they set off in Sha Ra’s ship when they rescued Aura. That had cut off all communications with the fleet, so for nearly two months now Confederation time...silence. The Board had discussed that silence at their last meeting, Kraal reported, and they were starting to get a bit antsy. They didn’t believe that Sha Ra had been defeated, they were certain that it was some kind of technical problem preventing them from contacting the fleet.

That was going to work in their favor. If they thought that Sha Ra was still over here, they wouldn’t see them hitting them in Andromeda coming, especially since their first attack over there was going to use the Dreamers against them. They were *counting* on the Dreamers warning the Syndicate of trouble on the Dreamer homeworld, since their attack would be disguised within a catastrophic natural calamity that the Dreamers would believe was going to wipe out all life in the entire star system. But they didn’t know that, they couldn’t, because of the weakness in their power, the fact that they could not foresee or predict *their own* deaths. The Dreamer precogs would foresee the deaths of everyone around them, and conclude that they would die as well...and that was how they were going to hide the attack, by making them think that their deaths were going to be caused by a natural disaster rather than an attack. So, despite having prisoners that could predict the future, they weren’t going to see this coming.

They had that part of the plan worked out, both how they were going to fool the Dreamers and how they were going to prevent their prediction of total destruction from coming to pass, and that was the tricky part. Because they’d see it if the natural disaster was turned aside or stopped, even at the last minute, the trick to it was to set it into motion with the *full intention of carrying it out*, and then thwarting it at the absolute last possible *instant*. They would see that doom and warn the Syndicate, exploiting the fact that the Dreamers couldn’t foresee or predict *their own* deaths. The Karinnes

would cut the comm just as Syndicate was warned about the incoming calamity, and then they'd have no way to report that they had survived the calamity because something—or someone—intervened and saved the moon's population from extermination. By then, it would be too late, because the Dreamers loyal to the Syndicate would have no way to communicate that to their masters. The Syndicate's last communications with the Dreamer homeworld would be that a terrible catastrophe was about to destroy the entire star system, and then...nothing. That would give them no reason to think that it was an attack, and thus not give them motive to send reinforcements.

They'd came up with their plan after a lot of research and getting as much information as they could from both the infiltrators on E Chaio and from Aria herself, studying how her power worked. They'd learned that Dreamers couldn't predict with complete accuracy because the future, in a way, was not set in stone. That was why the Syndicate always couched their predictions in a percentile *probability* of success. There was a variable there, a random chance that things would turn out differently, and the further into the future the Dreamers looked, the bigger that variable and thus the greater chance that they'd be wrong. By waiting until the absolute last possible instant before they stepped in and having the full *intent* to allow it to happen until that moment, it would cause the Dreamers to see nothing but death and destruction. They would see the calamity coming in advance, see that it would exterminate all life on and around the moon, and report as much to the Syndicate capitol. The Syndicate would order its huge fleet there to retreat, to save itself from destruction, and abandon the Dreamers to their fate. The Confederation would then cut communications between the Dreamers and the Syndicate, *after* they ordered their fleet to escape and *before* the probability of complete destruction changed, and when the Dreamers saw that something had changed and that their world wasn't actually about to be destroyed, they'd have no way to warn anyone. If they did things right, the Syndicate would think that the Dreamers were wiped out in some cataclysm, at least until they got some visuals, found out what was really going on there, and responded. And by then, it would be too late. Even if the fleet that retreated turned around and came back, they'd find the space around the Dreamer homeworld interdicted and facing a trip back of takirs, maybe even months, that got longer and longer with every second that passed. And it would all hinge on timing. If they messed up the

timing, either the Dreamers would see that the entire operation was an elaborate trick, or they'd see that there was actually no danger to the Dreamer homeworld. But if their timing was perfect, if events unfurled exactly when and where they needed to happen, then the Dreamers would be fooled, the Syndicate would have no idea what was going on until it was too late, and they'd liberate the Dreamers from the Syndicate and remove that overwhelming advantage that the Syndicate enjoyed.

Kraal finished up his briefing, and then he left for E Chaio, using the nexus bridge to get there almost instantly. And that still boggled Jason's mind. Kraal would be traveling from Karis to *Andromeda*, and doing it almost instantaneously once the nexus bridge was linked to the beacon they had on E Chaio. The Kimdori that replaced him as the next briefer was a slender, willowy female with ghost white fur, almost glowing in its pristine lack of any color. Her eyes also had a strange pale rose coloration, which was highly unusual for a Kimdori. Jason realized that in human terms, she would be an *albino*. "My Denmother, your Grace, I am Maraa Hivrisxt," she introduced, bowing fluidly to them.

"My other new Gamekeeper in Andromeda," Zaa told him. "Her territory encompasses wherever the Consortium sets up their temporary government headquarters, so she may keep an eye on them."

"It is my task to keep us informed about the plans and movements of the Consortium, your Grace," she said with a nod. And with that, she began, giving them an overview of current Consortium operations and positions, explaining how they were trying to stall the Syndicate with their military forces to evacuate as many of their civilians and citizens as possible to the Milky Way. "They have plans for four more major waves of colonizers," she surmised. "This will evacuate the rest of their military assets, which will be protecting as many civilian transports as they can refit with stasis pods for their people. Those left behind will attempt to negotiate a peaceful end to the conflict, to in effect allow the Consortium to join the Syndicate as a member of the board. My analysts don't believe that the Syndicate would accept such terms, that it gives the current megacorps less profit to allow a new corp to join the board that controls all those assets. But the Consortium's rulers have no other real recourse. They are trying to protect the lives of their citizens as much as possible, and they believe that if they retain control over them, they can do so."

“I’d have to side with the analysts there,” Jason grunted, leaning back in his chair. “The greed of the rest of the Board would make them reject the offer. How many civilians are we looking at coming over here, Maraa?”

“Given that not even the Consortium knows, I can’t give an accurate number, your Grace,” she replied. “All of their remaining industry is now focusing on building stasis pods, and they’re converting every ship they can get their hands on into a colony ship, filled with stasis pods and the supplies they need to establish themselves over here. Given what assets the Consortium currently controls, I can give a very rough estimate of perhaps six to seven billion civilians escorted by what remains of their fleet, which we project will be approximately three hundred thousand military vessels once they launch their final wave. The remaining ships will be destroyed in the battles to hold the Syndicate back to give their people time to flee.”

“Barely a fraction of a fraction of their population,” Zaa noted. “They must be saving them by species, sending only a certain number of each species so they can continue, just in case the Syndicate decides to exterminate all former Consortium citizens.”

Maraa nodded. “Their main problem is with a lack of suitable ships. They simply don’t have enough hyperspace-capable ships to transport their people.”

“As much as I hate the Consortium for what they did over here...fuck. I can almost feel sorry for them,” Jason grunted.

“I understand your sentiment, your Grace,” Maraa agreed. “They have committed unforgivable crimes against us, but they *are* trying to save their people. Their methods are wrong, but their intent is noble.”

“Fear,” Jason breathed, remembering what the *shaman* told him, putting his hand over the *jaingi* on his shoulder. “Fear can make people do terrible things, things they would never otherwise do.”

“Truly, your Grace,” Maraa agreed.

“When will we see the next wave of Consortium civilians leave Andromeda?” Jason asked.

“Four months, if they hold to their current schedule.” A hologram of a starchart showing the edge of a galaxy appeared. “They are assembling

their wave here, at star system TA-01 by the Karinne mapping system.” The astrocartographers had started mapping Andromeda’s terrestrial systems, using the same system they’d used for their own galaxy. They’d assigned the designation of the edge of Andromeda directly facing their galaxy the T quadrant, and counterclockwise from it were the U, V, and W quadrants. The system Maraa was showing them was literally the closest terrestrial system in Andromeda to the Milky Way, which put it in the TA sector. And since it was the closest system to the Milky way in the closest sector, it was given the map designation 01.

The quadrary, Prakka, now held the designation T1BX-01, since it was now in the T1BX sector under the new mapping system.

“The wave will consist of nearly one hundred thousand civilian transports escorted by 35,000 military warships, carrying an estimated 577 million civilians.”

“Far more than the first,” Jason noted.

“They’re using much larger transport ships for this wave,” Maraa nodded. “Including two captured operational Syndicate super-ships. They are using them as civilian transports. We estimate that each of them is capable of carrying 250 million civilians in stasis.”

“That’s a smart use for them,” Jason admitted. “So, this is going to be the most important wave.”

“We believe so,” Maraa agreed. “They’re sending their largest ships carrying the most civilians and supplies in this second wave. We believe the first wave is to prepare for the coming of the rest. We think the first wave will be their technical workers and builders, preparing their arrival location for the other waves. They will set up the large-scale infrastructure, build the factories and housing and such, and then the waves after them will help populate what they build. The second wave will be critical because they will inhabit what the first wave prepares and get things going on a large scale, give the colonies they build real production capability, and the two remaining waves will be purely for civilian transportation, getting as many of their people over here as they can before they surrender. We have confirmed that they are sending their most valuable resources and materials with this second wave.”

“That...is going to be a problem,” Zaa said hesitantly.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Jason said.

“What do you mean, cousin?”

“I mean, I don’t have a solid plan yet, but I do have a couple of ideas,” he answered. “I’ll explain them to you when I think we can make something of them.”

“I think that if you tell us now, it might be more useful,” she chided.

He looked over at her. “Alright. I’ve been kicking around the idea of granting the Consortium safe passage to somewhere else,” he replied. “Like not in our galaxy. Like *far away* from our galaxy, so far that they can’t easily get back here to bother us again. We set up a couple of Stargates, let them see the other side, and offer to send them through and let them rebuild *there* instead of trying to colonize our galaxy. So, we find somewhere way, way far away from our galaxy where they’ll have plenty of room, someplace that doesn’t have any indigenous races they can conquer and exploit, and just let them go and leave them alone. They might go for it, because the Syndicate will have no idea where they went, and they won’t want to have to fight a war against the Confederation when they’re literally nothing but wandering nomads who are carrying everything in their ships. They’ll be *safe* where we send them. And once we take down the Stargates and leave, we never have to cross paths again.”

Zaa gave him a surprised look. “Cousin...that is a *very good* idea,” she said with admiration.

“I agree, my Denmother. That has real potential,” Maraa agreed. “It may pose some problems with the Confederation, explaining just how we got a Stargate opened to another galaxy, but we might be able to come up with something if we start planning for it now. Plant a story that the Karinnes have sent the pieces of a Stargate through a one-way wormhole to a distant galaxy.”

“The Confederation doesn’t necessarily need to know,” Jason ventured. “We just convince them to let us handle it. That we’ll go out into Flat Space and confront the Consortium colonizing wave and convince it to change course, completely averting the war. Only the Ruu, Moridon, Subrians, and Alliance have sensors capable of tracking the colonizing force way out

there, so we just convince them that they have no reason to be curious. And besides, I *really* don't want the Urumi and the Jun to know where the Consortium is," he said fervently. "Sk'Vrae and Quord might start getting ideas if they know where to send their fleets. And even over that, the empires that the Consortium invaded might be looking for payback over the atrocities they committed."

"That is a definite possibility," Zaa agreed thoughtfully. "And enough of the Confederation might side with you to win the vote. There would be some bad feelings, but I think it could be managed."

"Yeah, Sk'Vrae may not talk to me for a few years after that," Jason said sourly. "She considers the Consortium to owe the Urumi a blood debt, and she won't ever let that go."

"Despite that, I think that your idea has potential, cousin," Zaa told him. "I will have my children who are at the vanguard of our exploration teams look for a suitable location. How far out were you considering?"

"Like not in this galactic cluster," he answered. "Maybe not even in this cosmic string. I want the trip to get back here by hyperspace to take *millennia*. I want them so far away from us that I never have to think about them again."

"I think we can find a place like that," Zaa told him.

"We shouldn't depend on that, though," Jason said. "No matter how reasonable *we* see it, they might not. So we continue to plan as if we have to repel them by force."

"A prudent course of action, your Grace," Maraa agreed.

It took Maraa maybe another half hour to finish her briefing, getting them up to date on everything she knew and their plans to learn more, and then she too was sent on to Andromeda so she could take command of her territory. Jason and Zaa sat in the briefing room and discussed what they'd heard for quite a while, then she showed him some of the images that her explorers had already sent back. They'd spread into every galactic formation in their cluster and were exploring with gleeful abandon. She showed him some breathtaking holos of some of the things they'd already seen, and Zaa leaned back in her chair with a strange, dreamy kind of smile. "This is the time to be alive cousin," she told him, almost girlishly. "For us,

for the Kimdori, the invention of the drives...you cannot understand what it means to us. To be the Denmother at this time, to have the privilege of sending my children out to explore the entire universe...I could die right here in this chair and have no regrets.”

“I have a pretty good idea,” he chuckled, taking her hand with a smile. “For thousands of years, you’ve been a race of explorers who ran out of things to explore. And now someone’s gone and unlocked the gate to the fence around the yard that had been holding you in.”

“Always with the dog metaphors with you,” she teased.

“Well, you *are* kinda a dog, Zaa,” he teased right back. “A really big, kinda smelly, bad tempered, slightly scary dog.”

“I am not *smelly*,” she protested, which made him laugh. “And you should watch it, Jason. You are related to us. That makes *you* a dog too.”

“Bark, bark,” he said dryly, which made her laugh despite herself.

Since it was so late, Zaa decided not to keep him there. She went back to Kimdori Prime using the nexus bridge, and Jason headed home. He missed dinner, but Seido met him at the back door and pushed him straight to the kitchen table, where a large platter of freshly prepared *baika* was waiting for him, a Shio dish that he really liked. It looked a little like camel puke mixed with moldy potato salad, but if one could get past that, it was a delicious dish. And that wasn’t entirely unusual for Shio recipes. They often tended to not care how something *looked* and concentrated on how it *tasted*. *Such a lifesaver*, he sent to her gratefully. *Ayama and Surin turn in?*

Sanjira was a bit cranky tonight, Seido confirmed as Jason attacked his dinner.

Where’s everyone? I don’t sense Jyslin around.

Jyslin took the babies out in a skimmer, she answered. *The twins are in bed, Aria is up in her room with Sora and Aran, and Rann and Shya are in the living room with Danelle, Kyri, and Zach. They’re playing a game over CivNet.*

A skimmer? [Jys, what are you up to?] he communed to her over the biogenic network.

[Jon was being a bit fussy, and he always calms down when he's in a skimmer and you turn down the inertial dampers. I think the motion soothes him,] she answered. *[Like a big rocking cradle.]*

[I'm chalking this weird behavior up to him being Tim's son,] Jason answered. *[So, you're just flying around?]*

[More or less. We're out over the open ocean east of Karsa right now, I was about to turn around and come home. He should be asleep by then.]

[Sounds good to me.]

[You home?]

[Yup, just got back,] he answered. *[The meeting with Zaa ran long.]*

[I'll say, it's almost 25:00. How did it go?]

[Just a bunch of briefings from her people to get us up to speed. Nothing new on the Dreamer's homeworld, but hopefully they'll have something to report tomorrow. The only real new info was that Kraal was sent to E Chaio.]

[Really?]

[Yeah. Zaa said she didn't trust anyone but him to handle things on the Syndicate's capitol planet.]

[I can understand that. As dangerous as that place will be for a Kimdori, I'd want my best there too if I was Zaa. And Kraal's one of her best.]

[No doubt there,] he agreed. *[I'm just glad Zaa didn't keep me there all night. We're going to be busy tomorrow.]*

[I can't wait for this one,] Jyslin communed eagerly. Tomorrow, they were going to Virsa, and there they would install the core of the newest CBIM. They'd been delayed by about two months because of a minor flaw that showed up in the core crystal that they'd had to repair, an anomaly in about 74,000 molecules in an area about 1 Terran micron across. It didn't ruin the crystal, however, so at least the issue was a minor one. The crystal would be fully tempered and ready for installation tomorrow morning, and as usual, it would be 3D that would be installing it. Jyslin was eager for this one because she was going to be on the installation team. She had been

taking a much more active role in 3D since the Syndicate war, splitting her time between the Paladins and 3D. *[What are you going to name this one?]*

[Cyarri.]

[Three syllables? Are you trying to jinx her, Jason?]

[I didn't even think of that,] he answered with an audible laugh. *[Alright then, miss jinx detector, what do you think we should name her?]*

[Cyri,] she answered.

[You know, we have a Cyra already. And a Cybi.]

[So? Just how is Cyra in any way Cyri?]

[How about we compromise and call her Cylanstranthimitra.]

Jyslin returned raw amusement in her thought. *[You are such a jerk,]* she accused. *[I don't think I could even pronounce that if I said it aloud.]*

[Hey, it differentiates her from the others.]

[If we're looking for making her stand out, then let's go with Cyrsi. Like that goddess from your Terran Greek mythology story, The Odyssey.]

[That's Circe, but we can fudge the pronunciation a bit, I suppose,] he answered. *[And Circe was a villain.]*

[So? It's a cool name,] she retorted.

Jason just had to laugh. *[As long as it sounds cool, what other reason could there be?]* he teased.

[Well, isn't that how Cyra got her name?] she challenged. *[Wasn't your reasoning for it, and I quote, it sounds good?]*

[That's different.]

[Oh, I'm waiting for this explanation,] she communed impishly. *[So impress me with you logic, baby.]*

[It's very simple logic. I'm the Grand Duke. When I make a decision, it's always a good one.]

There was a startled silence. *[We'll discuss the finer points of that explanation when I get home, buster,]* she threatened. *[Which should be in*

about twenty minutes.]

[I'm all aflutter,] he replied dryly.

Jyslin, I take it? Seido asked as she set out a small piece of Terran pecan pie for dessert.

Yeah, telling me where she was. Then she decided to challenge my decision-making skills as a Grand Duke. I'm gonna have to punish her for that, he smiled in her direction.

Just activate the sound dampers in your bedroom before you get her clothes off, Seido noted, which made him laugh.

Why Seido, you naughty girl. Sounds like you need to take a trip into Karsa and blow off a little steam, he teased.

Why, when Symone is next door? Seido asked simply.

Good luck getting her away from Tim, Jason noted lightly. Jason had come to find out not long ago that Seido was a lesbian, which was somewhat unusual in Shio culture. Homosexuals in the Federation had legal rights and protections, but Shio culture was biased against them, similar to several cultures on Terra. The *other* half of the reason that Seido left the Federation for the House of Karinne was because of her sexual orientation. She was free to be what she wanted to be on Karis, in a society that was accepting of those with her inclinations. That was why it took so long for Jason to find out, because Seido was so conditioned to keep that secret. It had taken months before she finally revealed it to Jason and Jyslin, and she'd been really nervous when she did, like they'd fire her on the spot for coming out to them. They almost laughed her out of the room when she admitted that was why she kept it a secret so long. Everyone on the strip knew that Seido was homosexual, and not only did it not bother anyone on the strip one bit—well, maybe it bothered Temika, but she never said a word—it got Seido a little attention from a couple of girls that weren't afraid to look in a girl's direction when they were feeling a little bandy.

Hell, a good half of Faey women weren't entirely straight, and Symone was a good example of that. Actually, Kumi was the better example, since Symone was much more interested in women than Kumi. Kumi was straight, but she wasn't so straight that she hadn't dallied with women in the past, just for the fun of it, and would do so again whenever she got curious

enough to give it another try. Faey were not homophobic, neither their men or their women, and many of them of both sexes were what Terran culture would call *bi-curious*. Straight, but willing to engage in sexual acts with the same sex and feeling no shame or social pressure to refrain from doing so.

Symone was an example of the bi-curious inclination in many Faey, because even before she imprinted Jyslin and Dahnai, she hadn't been entirely straight. Symone far preferred men to women, but she had no problems getting in bed with a woman at all, found it erotic, and sometimes she went looking for a woman...and not because Tim found it extremely exciting to see his wife in bed with a woman. Symone had already had a couple of little trysts with Seido, demonstrating that she was more bisexual than she was straight...or kinda in between.

With Symone, it was hard to tell.

Tim's never a barrier, Seido told him with a naughty tilt to her thought that made him laugh.

I take it the problem with Tim is getting him out of the room?

You know him well.

I do. And you should go find yourself a permanent girlfriend.

I've been looking. I'm not sure a Faey is what I'm after though. They're...cold.

Jason laughed again. *That's your fault, not theirs. You're the one with the abnormally high body temperature.*

No, I'm normal, and you're the ones with an abnormally cold body temperature, she countered.

So, what's the dating scene like on Karis for a Shio looking for a Shio that interests her?

Not that bad, she answered as he finished up the main course and pulled over the pecan pie. She sat down at the table with him and put her hand under her chin. *It's a lot better here than it was in the Federation. The social clubs here don't have to hide themselves. But a lot of us, you know, we're still a little reluctant to be open about...you know. Who we are.*

The fact that you're almost afraid to send it to me tells me how it feels, he sent with compassion.

It'll take a little time, she said with a grateful smile. *Anyway, there's several social clubs in Karsa for Shio like me. I've visited a few of them, met a few interesting ladies, but I haven't found anyone that really stands out yet.*

He could sense behind her thought that she did in fact have something of an object of affection, and it didn't take him long to figure out why she was so hesitant about it.

Mikano.

She was the only Shio female that came around the strip with any regularity, and she *was* a very beautiful woman. But, Jason also knew that Mikano was straight, so Seido really didn't have a chance there. Mikano's annoyance with Tim was based more on his aggression than on anything else. She actually thought he was a handsome man, it was just that his constant attempts to seduce her put her off. That was *not* how men behaved in Shio society, and when it came to men, Mikano expected them to behave like a Shio.

Well, I'm sure she's out there, Seido, he told her, taking her hand. *Some day you're going to find a beautiful, witty, charming, engaging lady and fall head over heels in love with her. And when you do, don't for a minute think she won't be welcome in this house when you move her in with you.*

She gave him a look of gratitude, then leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

Cheating on her already? You are such a tramp, he winked, then laughed when she smacked him on the arm. *There's the Seido I know and love,* he grinned. *But there is one stipulation.*

What is that?

She has to be a good cook.

I can make her a good cook, Seido snorted.

And have big boobs.

Hey now, that's for me to decide, she challenged.

You're going to need the opinion of a man when it comes to the proper body proportions for a lady, he told her cheekily. We're the experts, after all.

The look she gave him was almost adorably acerbic.

It's the truth. You're too biased because of your own, either dismissing those whose breasts don't match your perfection or being too jealous over the women whose breasts are bigger, or better shaped, or have sexier nipples. You need an independent eye with a natural affinity for admiring a woman's rack to judge these things.

She raised a single elegant eyebrow.

I can prove it. I'll call Songa over here to explain to you all about how men are genetically inclined to ogling a woman's breasts, far more than women. We have the biological edge, he declared with his thought almost dripping with satirical gravity. That makes us undeniable experts in the field.

And I thought Terran men had a tiny chance of not being completely hopeless, she teased.

Never accuse a man with 22 kids of having no interest in a woman's tits, Seido, he sent seriously, and that got her. She burst out into glorious, delightful laughter, and having achieved victory, Jason went back to enjoying his pecan pie.

After dinner, he wandered into the living room, and saw what was about typical for his house. Rann and Shya were on the couch, Shya actually sitting up, with Danelle, Kyri, and Zach sitting on the floor in front of it. The five of them were playing a game on the vidy. He just glanced at it then gave it a double take, because he was honestly surprised when he recognized one of the characters...Mario from the Nintendo games. He looked and saw that others were from the current hot CivNet games for kids and teens. And it was a bit weird to see short, squat little Mario standing side by side with Ethera Blade from the *Starblade* series, given she was Faey in typical Faey attire, her armor/costume had a wedge open in the front that bared her breasts and pubic hair with two chains that ran above and below her breasts that connected the two sides together, but covered her arms, legs, and sides. And the programmers had made to make sure that

those bare breasts were dynamically...bouncy. *[What game is this?]* he had to ask.

[Ultimate Party Three,] Rann answered. *[It's like a bunch of minigames you can play with a bunch of characters from some pretty cool games.]*

Well, that told him that Nintendo had transitioned well to CivNet.

[Well, I have about fifteen minutes before your mother gets home. Think I can get in on this one?]

[Sure, Dad,] Kyri offered, scooting to the side a bit to let him sit on the couch behind her.

Mario wasn't the only Terran character in the game. Chun Li from *Street Fighter* was also in it—she was strangely popular among the Faey, so no doubt that was why she was chosen over that game series' iconic character, Ryu—as well as Master Chief from *Halo*. That was characters from three different game companies, proving that whatever this game was, it was a major collaboration between companies both on and off Terra.

Jyslin came in with the babies in a stroller as Jason was getting destroyed in some hoversled race minigame, playing Master Chief as an homage to his own youth....and feeling a bit silly seeing the Master Chief sitting on a hoversled flying around a race course instead of killing aliens and blowing stuff up. Like just about any game played on Karis—and increasingly more and more across the entire Confederation—it was jack compatible, merge capable, and had an interface input control option, which meant that the kids and Jason could play it without “exie” controllers. The kids were all merged to the game and playing in first person mode where Jason was not, and he suspected that was why they were kicking his butt.

[Hey love,] Jyslin communed, love and contentment rippling through her thought. *[Playing?]*

[Losing,] he admitted. *[Zach is a beast at this. He's nearly a lap up on all of us. Let me take my medicine with dignity and I'll be up to help you put the babies to bed. Sounds like they're sleeping.]*

[Finally,] Jyslin communed with relief. *[See you in a few, baby.]*

Zach showed no mercy, beating all of them soundly, and Jason went up to help Jyslin with the babies. He delayed that as long as possible to hold

his daughter, enjoying watching Julia sleep in his arms as Jyslin laid Jon down in his crib. Jyslin came up to him and put an arm around his shoulders and joined him in looking down at their daughter. *[Such a little angel,]* Jason noted, his thought vibrating with love.

[A very patient little angel. She was very tolerant of Jon's fussing,] Jyslin noted, kissing him on the cheek. *[But I'm sure she'd be more comfortable in the crib.]*

[She's asleep, she's comfortable as it is.]

[Baby, put her down so you can put your arms around me,] she ordered playfully.

He glanced at her. *[I'm not sure that's better than what I have now,]* he teased, then grinned impishly when she gave him a challenging look. He moved slowly and carefully to lay Julia down, then he put his arms around Jyslin and gave her a long, lingering kiss. *[You about ready to go downstairs and physically force the kids at gunpoint to go to bed?]*

[It won't be that hard,] Jyslin smiled at him. *[I'll just shut the power off to the vidlink.]*

Jason had to laugh.

Chiira, 35 Hiraa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 27 October 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

*Chiira, 35 Hiraa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Virga CBIM Facility, Virsa, Karis

They had this down to a science now.

With a bit of a flourish, Jason checked that the last of the power feeds connected to the base of the new CBIM's core were secure, with a hawkish Siyhaa nodding and marking that off the checklist. They'd arrived at dawn and got right to work, getting everything ready, and when the core arrived promptly at 11:00, they were ready to bring it straight in and seat it. Six

hours later, here they were, finishing up the last of the installation checklist and preparing to power it up. Siyhaa was in charge of the operation—this was her purview as 3D’s computer specialist—and this time, she had Myleena and Jyslin on the team. Myleena was up in the observation room doing the last of the checks to ensure the CBIM core facility was wired into CivNet and the biogenic network properly, and Jyslin was on the other side of the room, standing with a team that had just initialized the last of the new CBIM’s I/O tree racks.

“That’s it. The checklist is complete, and exactly on schedule,” Siyhaa declared loudly, her voice eminently satisfied. “We are ready for core power-up. Remember, everyone, the Shimmer Dome has reprogrammed the initialization sequence, so this CBIM will start up using a different protocol,” she warned them. “But everything else should be the same. Myleena, are you ready?” she called.

“Ready in here, Hadhja,” her voice came over the intercom.

“Power team, are we ready?”

“Good to go, Siyhaa,” Bo answered.

“Core systems team, are we ready?”

“Good to go,” Jyslin answered.

“Then we are prepared. Rook, you are at the console. Bring up the core.”

“Starting up the core now,” he affirmed, looking down to the console.

Four seconds later, they saw what they expected to see...but also not. The Shimmer Dome had slightly reprogrammed the initial start-up for CBIMs, so the Cybi-clone hologram appeared, but it didn’t manifest behind the circular rail that denoted the location of the hard shield. *“CBIM designation C-11 initialization,”* the CBIM reported. *“Communal core systems operational.”* A commune swept across the room, originating from the core. *“External equipment detected. Generations detected. Core room sensors initialized. Data inflow nominal, sensory encoders and decoders operational.”* The hologram opened its eyes, then seemed to focus them on Jason. This was where the Shimmer Dome said that the initialization program had been changed, to streamline the initialization process a little

bit. If they did it right, the CBIM would access its startup database right off the bat, and they'd put the identities of the installation team in there, to prevent the CBIM from challenging everyone in the room like all the others had. *"Initialization database accessed. Entity identification. All entities within core chamber identified, valid entities. Entity identification, Grand Duke Karinne identified. Entity Grand Duke Karinne, designation?"*

"I am Jason Karinne," he answered. "You may address me as Jason for now."

"Processed. CBIM C-11 designation?"

"Your designation will be Cyrsi."

Jyslin almost beamed from her position across the room.

"Designation stored. CBIM C-11 designation changed to Cyrsi. Initialization process ready."

And that was about the extent of the changes. They then went through the hours-long process of bringing up all of Cyrsi's external stacks, unit by unit, subsystem by subsystem, until the entire CBIM core facility was configured and running. Once that was done, the hologram put its feet on the ground and put its hands behind its back. *"Initialization complete. Command, Jason?"*

"Your first task is to receive data download from another CBIM, Cybi. You will flag that data as critical read-only data, you will encrypt it, and store it directly within your core."

"Processed. Communal query detected, origination CBIM C-06, designation Cybi. Download commencing." They only had to wait about thirty seconds. *"Download complete. Data stored in my core memory lattice, flagged as read-only critical data and encrypted. Command, Jason?"*

"Your first task is to alter your hologram to differentiate you from the other CBIMs. How you change it is entirely up to you," he told her...if it was a her. They'd find out in a moment.

"Processing." The hologram blurred, and when it reset, it was nearly a shakra shorter and had a waifish, pixie hairstyle, as well as looking like... like a *teenager*. She had narrowed the hologram's hips, flattened the bust a

little, making her look young. Now *that* was quite a unique decision!
“*Alteration complete. Is this acceptable, Jason?*”

“That’s your decision, Cyrsi,” Jason told her. “Is it acceptable to you?”

“*It is satisfactory.*”

“Then that’s what we’ll go with, for now,” he told her. “Now, access your initialization database and report your mission.”

“*Processing. My mission is to operate the continent of Virga, assisting in the settlement process as the continent is populated and then managing its systems once the settlement process is complete. I will also be performing assorted various other tasks as required, due to the fact that operating the continent will not burden my systems.*”

“Correct. Do you understand what that means?”

She gave him a curious look. “*I do not understand your query. Explain.*”

“It’s a simple question, Cyrsi. Do you understand the *meaning* of the mission you have been given?”

She was quiet a long moment, her eyes quizzical. “*I...am to help the population of Virga...live?*”

“Exactly,” he said with a nod. “Your job isn’t just to manage systems. It’s to help the people that move to Virga *live*, to make sure they have what they need, that everything works, and that they flourish and grow. You’ll do what you can to make them happy, at least within the boundaries of your authority. I know that’s an alien concept to you at the moment, since you just came online, but I promise you that it will make more sense to you once you’ve had some time to learn.”

“*I will endeavor to perform my mission satisfactorily.*”

“I’m sure you’ll do just fine,” he said confidently. “As per your database, we’re going to be observing your core chamber for forty days to ensure everything is working properly. If you have any problems or questions, you can ask them, they’ll be right here. You can also contact me by hologram or by commune at any time, if you have a question you feel that I can answer. But for now, there’s a lot you need to learn, and a lot we

have to do. Cybi,” he called. When she manifested a hologram inside the core chamber, he looked over to her. “You know the drill. Show her around, explain things to her, introduce her to the others, and do what you can to prepare her for dealing with flesh and blood people.”

“That’s the hardest part of this assignment,” she teased with a light smile.

“Oh, hush. And get busy,” he ordered.

“Yes, Jason,” she replied flippantly, then the two holograms vanished.

“We also have more to do,” Siyhaa declared. “Let us test the core evacuation system, now that the core is operational,” she announced. “While we do that, Myleena, your team will integrate Cyrsi fully into the biogenic network. Once that is done, our work will be complete.”

“Not a problem, Siyhaa. We’re already working on it up here,” Myleena assured her from the observation pod.

“Bo, man the manual evacuation console,” Siyhaa ordered.

“On it, boss,” he replied, hurrying over.

The evacuation test went without a hitch. The entire core chamber retreated into its heavily armored bunker deep, deep within the planet, a trip that took nearly half an hour, and then they tested all the emergency systems while they were down there. The core had complete connectivity to the surface with both its data and power systems, and the on-site emergency power systems were working exactly as expected. After making sure everything worked, they returned the core to its usual position in the facility and locked it in place, which took about another half hour. So, it was midafternoon by the time Myleena finished the integration work, and Jason was getting a bit hungry as he packed up his tools and prepared to clear out of the core chamber, while the observation team, headed by Bo, settled in for their first shift in Cyrsi’s 40 day probationary period.

But it was *satisfied* hunger. They’d been at it all day, but the results were good. The CBIM was up and running, they’d run into no problems, the changes to the initialization program had had no issues, and now the next phase of Cyrsi’s journey would begin, her probation.

And now there were six CBIMs...and in just three months, there would be a seventh, on Sarga. And two months after that, there would be an eighth and final CBIM on Hirga. And on the other side of that, in just a couple of months or so, they'd have a second CBMOM, at least if the estimated time of completion didn't change again. And maybe a month after that, the CBMOM for the *Aegis* would be ready, the one and only command ship that was getting a CBMOM upgrade.

[Cybi, you have the compatibility testing schedule ready for Cyrsi?] he asked.

[Yes, but I had to make a small change.]

[What change?]

[Jyslin,] she stressed. *[She's a Generation now, Jason, and that means she gets tested with everyone else.]*

[And how are we going to explain it if Jyslin ends up being Cyrsi's merge?]

[We don't,] she answered. *[You seem to forget that we keep that information secret, Jason.]*

[Well yeah, but the KMS knows who's matched to which CBIM. They kinda have to know so they can get them where they need to be if we're attacked.]

[Then we simply lie to them,] Cybi told him. *[If Jyslin turns out to be Cyrsi's match, we just tell them that the secondary is the primary, then come up with some excuse as to why Jyslin is in Cyrsi's core chamber. We can't simply ignore it if Jyslin is the one, Jason. It would be a disservice to the house to not put the strongest merge in that chair, even if it is a Generation that nobody knows is a Generation but us. For that matter, we should test Jyslin for compatibility with all the other higher units to see if she has a stronger merge than the current primary or secondary. As powerful as she is, I'm almost certain that she'll be supplanting someone. She's, what, the number two Generation now?]*

[Number three, Saelle beats her by a smidge,] Jason answered. *[But with Saelle assigned to Draconis to protect Dahnai, that makes Jyslin the number two Generation available on planet.]*

[Are you going to reduce our defensive ability by sticking her in the bunker, Jason?] Cybi challenged.

[No, I guess not. You win, Cybi.]

[As usual,] she replied cheekily.

[Girl, you are getting so bitchy in your old age.]

[I'm not Faey, Jason, calling me old isn't an insult. It's a complement,] she teased. *[And if we're lucky, she'll be taking your chair.]*

[You're not getting rid of me that easy, bitch,] he retorted. *[The primary chair in your core chamber is fucking mine, no matter what you say or what numbers you throw at me.]*

[I love you too, Jason,] she replied warmly.

[You better, or I'll pull your plug.]

Her reply was pure amusement.

They all went out to eat in Virsa, which gave Jason a chance to get a look around. He hadn't been to Virsa in a while, and the city was much busier now than it had been back then. The city was only partially up and running when he came last but now the entire city was bustling with people, and in the growing trend, the Faey weren't the overwhelming majority out on the streets. There were still more Faey than anything else on Karis, but that majority was a very slim one now. Terrans and Shio along with Faey made up most of the population of the house, at least in the cities. In reality, the most populous race on Karis were the *Kizzik*, due to five different major hives moving to Karis from the Imperium and the large number of drones they had here now. Since the drones almost never left their hives, Kizzik were a rare sight on most of the planet. But it was no longer unusual to see another race or species out among them, and it got less and less unusual with every passing day.

And that was just the way Jason liked it. He was a huge believer in the idea that diversity brought strength, and he liked seeing diversity on the streets.

Virsa was on the southern coast of the continent, built on a small, narrow peninsula extending out into the ocean with islands around it, very

much like Hong Kong back on Terra. The peninsula and islands were pretty flat, rising up from the coast very gently, so the city was expansive, flat, and very open. It was actually a marvel of architecture and city planning, since the city was built half on land and half on water, built on the peninsula and the islands around it, with large, creative bridges connecting them together, along with a lot of artificial platforms built on the water between the islands and buildings built in the water, rising up out of it. The land sections of the city were crisscrossed with numerous canals for water drainage, canals that had buildings built right on their edges so that the buildings formed the walls holding the canal's water back, so in a way, the city was like a really large cross between Hong Kong and Venice. The city was right on the edge of the subtropical belt, having a similar climate to northern Spain or northern Florida back on Terra, which made it comfortable for a very large cross-section of the species that lived here, and that made Virsa a very cosmopolitan city. The city had a population of 12 million now, but not all of them were permanent residents. A good quarter of them were what Jason would call temporary residents and would move deeper into the Virgan continent when some of the new cities in there opened up and the land was fully terraformed and ready to support life. Many of them were farmers and ranchers, waiting to make sizable land claims so they could set up with lots of open land, abundant water (Virga was a rainy continent), and no competition. The southern coast of the continent would be dominated by industry and tourism, taking advantage of the sub-tropical climate along the southern expanses of the continent, but the warm temperate interior and cool temperate northern reaches would be dominated by ranching and agriculture.

Virsa wasn't the queen of the temporary resident statistic. The population of Sarsa was a whopping 26 million right now, and almost all of them were anxiously waiting for the continent's land to become available for claim. They'd all moved to Sarsa to be closer when the land use authority opened the continent to settlement. And a good 40% of them were Shio. The Shio were bound and determined to take over Sarsa, Jason often mused, because its tropical climate was what they found most comfortable. It was a simple rule of thumb that on Karis, the closer one was to the equator, the larger the percentage of a town's population would be Shio. Jerrim had a plan to deal with Sarsa and would be limiting land claims there to just 2 dakra plots, which was about an acre and a half. He had also

already established some sizable nature preserves and building restrictions to keep the continent from all but becoming a megalopolis that stretched from shore to shore.

The opposite could be said for Hirga. Since nearly a third of the continent was sub-arctic or arctic, the continent had the least interest when it came to settlements and homesteads. Some of the hardier cold-loving species were more than eager to settle there, like the Jobodi and Ubutu that had joined the house, but Hirga was never going to be exactly popular as anything but a vacation destination for people who liked skiing or outdoor activities like camping. The continent was the most mountainous of the six continents of Karis as well, so it was a place only someone that enjoyed a challenge from nature would consider home.

Well, if he could ever get any damn Kirri to join the house, they'd probably prefer Hirga too. It most closely matched Kirri'arr's cold temperate climate and rugged topography, just without the volatile weather.

The restaurant they decided to try out was something of a unique place and built very much in the style of the city. It was actually a boat, like a really big houseboat, with the tables sitting in the open air on the roof of the building. The restaurant sat between the mainland and the largest island in the city, and it wasn't the only such floating building or boat out there. They were positioned so they formed something of a line, like a street, which sat between two buildings that were built into the sea floor and rose up out of the water to soar up two hundred stories. Jason, Jyslin, Myleena, Tom, Maggie, and Rook took seats at a round table with a large umbrella in the center to shade them from the sun. "What language is this?" Maggie asked as they looked at the menus.

"Shio," Jason said. "This is a Shio restaurant, Mags."

"Huh. You know, I don't think I've ever seen written Shio," she mused. "At least I know what to order here. I love Shio food."

"So do I," Jyslin agreed. "Seido's made me a huge fan."

"So, are there any epic battles between Ayama and Seido over who's the better cook, Jayce?" Tom asked.

He laughed. "Not really. They each have their specialties. I don't think Ayama's cooked a single Shio dish since Seido moved in. Even she admits

that Seido does those better. And Seido doesn't cook Faey dishes. When it comes to just about anything else, they both cook them."

"Well that sounds almost boring," Maggie said.

"You don't know those two, Mags," Jyslin laughed. "Life with them in the house is anything but boring."

The waitress came, a very young, very cute Shio girl that looked like she was fifteen or sixteen. She had pattern green Shio skin and silver-white hair, which looked really good on her. She only spoke Shio, so the others had to access Shio on their interfaces to translate what she said for them, and Rook and Jason translated their orders into Shio for her. "Must be one of the newest arrivals," Tom mused as she scurried off to bring them their first course. "I thought they were implanting new members with Faey."

"It's available if they want it, but it's not mandatory," Jason answered.

"She's adorable," Maggie mused. "I'm glad Bo's not here. Her father may run us out."

Jason blurted out a laugh, but Jyslin looked a little perplexed. "Bo has a thing for Shio women," he explained to her. "He's dating one."

"Oh, pfft. Terran men who go blue never go back," Jyslin declared. "Faey women know how to keep a man happy."

"That's because you're an entire race of sluts," Maggie teased.

"You're just jealous that we have way more fun than you," Myleena retorted playfully. "And I've heard a few stories about you, Mags, that puts a Faey woman to shame."

Maggie actually blushed, which made Tom and Jason burst out laughing.

"You know what they say about redheads," Tom grinned.

"No, Tom, what *do* they say about redheads?" Jyslin challenged, ostentatiously flipping a lock of her auburn hair.

"Red hair means hot blood," he said, nonplussed.

"Well, that much is true," Jyslin agreed shamelessly. "And I am seriously behind on my 3D gossip. I had no idea Bo was dating Emia."

“He’s not, it’s another Shio,” Maggie told her, a bit disapprovingly. “I wouldn’t mind at all if he was dating Emia, cause that girl he’s dating is as dumb as a rock.”

“At least she’s pretty,” Tom noted.

“She’d better be glad she is,” Maggie snorted. “Anyway, what about you, you little sneak?” she said, looking at Jyslin.

“Sneak?” Jyslin asked.

“And just how long were you hiding your little trick?” she demanded.

“Ohhh, the TK,” she laughed. “I wasn’t *hiding* it. Me and some girls on the strip got curious after Ayuma coaxed Sirri’s ability out, so we had her test us. Turns out *three* of us had TK, we just never developed it.”

“Yeah, Yana and Sheleese too,” Jason nodded. “I’m not surprised at all.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t stumble across it by now.”

“You don’t *accidentally* stumble across something like that, Tom,” Jason told him. “It takes way too much concentration to use to do it by accident. Most likely, whoever tested Jys, Yana, and Sheleese when they were younger was just bad at it. The one that tested Jyslin had to be an utter moron to miss it. And when they’re told they don’t have it, they don’t really try to see if it’s there.”

“Yup,” Jyslin agreed. “Besides, I was way too busy back then learning how to control my talent to worry much about the TK. They put me in primary school telepathy classes when I was eight. Trelle’s garland, did I ever feel awkward,” she laughed. “And all the primary school students weren’t much help, they were all jealous that I expressed so young.”

“I thought you expressed younger than that,” Myleena mused.

“I did. They had tutors teach me at first, but when I turned eight, they decided I was old enough for classroom instruction,” she answered. “They don’t teach telepathy in elementary school, and I was too advanced for the basic telepathy classes they teach in middle school, so they put me in primary school for those. I went to my normal school, then I’d go to the primary school halfway across the dome for my last class. It was so far that

I had to miss a class in elementary school and had to make it up after school, so I was still in school when everyone else got out. I hated it,” she chuckled. “But I only did that for a year. The next year, Mom and Dad hired another tutor. I was still stuck taking lessons after class, but at least those weren’t bad. I really liked my tutor, I had the biggest crush on him,” she laughed. “Mister Abren. Trelle, he was so handsome.”

“A man?” Myleena asked in surprise.

“He was *skilled*, one of the most skilled telepaths I think I’ve ever met. He was almost as good as *Ryn*,” Jyslin replied in defense. “He graduated from one of the telepathic academies on Draconis. It wasn’t Xerian, but it was one of the other really elite ones. I learned *so much* from him.”

“So, what’s it like?” Maggie asked.

“The TK? It’s seriously hard,” she replied. “I have to work myself up to it, and afterward I feel like I carried a hovercar halfway up a hill. But Ayuma said that’ll pass once I get more practice. Then, there’s the nosebleeds,” Jyslin sighed, which made both Jason and Myleena chuckle and nod.

“More often than not, it’s much easier to get up and get it yourself than use TK,” Jason said.

“I think I had a perpetual nosebleed when I learned,” Myleena added. “It got so bad, my aunt took me to the annex because I was fainting anytime I stood up.”

“That’s a lot of blood loss,” Tom noted.

“That’s not the scary part. The bleeding out of your ears if you push yourself too hard, now *that’s* the scary part,” Myleena said seriously. “And I think I had a panic attack the first time I caused *sangei*.”

“What’s that?” Maggie asked.

“*Bleeding from the pores and sweat glands in the skin*,” Rook answered. “*A condition caused by extreme psionic exertion.*”

“Holy shit, seriously? You were sweating blood?”

“Yeah,” Myleena nodded. “I was even crying blood, it even affected my tear ducts.”

“I had that happen *once*,” Jason shivered.

“I remember that,” Tom mused. “Right after we moved to Cheyenne Mountain. Back in the Legion days.”

“Yeah, when Jys was training me,” he nodded. “Trust me, Mags, *sangei* is some scary shit.”

“It sure sounds like it,” she agreed.

The waitress brought their appetizers, which were breaded and grilled strips of meat from a bird indigenous to Shio, and black bread baked on a grill. It even had the grill marks on the bottom. The poultry had a nutty flavor that made it quite delicious, enhanced by the breading, and Shio black bread was hearty and slightly sweet, almost as if honey was baked into it. Their conversation turned to work, at least what they could talk about in an unsecured area, and that held them over until the main courses arrived. “Wow. Woooow,” Maggie said, closing her eyes after taking a bite. “I’ve never had *yaji* this good.”

“The chef here is amazing,” Myleena agreed, spooning more *bajo* stew into her mouth.

“That’s the Shio for you,” Tom chuckled. “Often their best chefs can be found in mom and pop diners and restaurants.”

“Whoever this guy is, he’s like insanely good,” Jason agreed. “I’d better never tell Seido about this place, I may lose her. She may run over here and demand to work in his kitchen so she can learn from him.”

“She still planning to open her own restaurant?” Tom asked.

“Yeah, but she’s putting it off. She likes working for us,” Jyslin nodded.

“She likes the paycheck,” Myleena winked.

“That never hurts,” Jason chuckled. “When I find someone worth paying, I pay them what they’re worth. It takes a special kind of person to keep our kids in line.”

Jyslin laughed. “Does it ever, especially Shya,” she agreed.

“Yes, her little Imperial Highness can be a handful,” Jason agreed lightly. “What do you think, Rook?” Jason asked as Rook took a very small,

tentative bite of the bread. His bionoid body couldn't swallow it, but it *could* taste it. He'd done some work on that part of the sensor mesh, including installing fully operational "taste buds" on the tongue.

"It's definitely an unusual sensory experience. I can understand why the Shio are so enamored of eating," he replied, then he discreetly spit the bread out into a napkin.

"You really need to come up with a way to eat, that way you could get the whole experience," Jason told him.

"I haven't made any progress in that. I'm still stuck on what to do with the food the bionoid swallows," he answered. *"I've been debating adapting the molecular reclamation units in the recycling system of a replicator, but they're too big and take too much power for the power packs to handle."*

"Breaking the food down into molecules? That might work, you can just flush the stomach contents into the wastewater bladder in a bionoid and the bionoid can literally pee out the food in a liquid state," Jason mused.

"Eww, don't talk about stuff like that while I'm eating," Maggie protested.

"Actually...there might be a way to do that," Myleena said slowly, looking down at the table. "Swing by my office in the morning, Rook, before I head over to Project F. We'll talk about it."

"I've studied the reclamation—"

"Not reclamation units. Spiders."

"Have the spiders break down the food into a liquid?" Jason asked, and she nodded. "That would take a few million of them to do it quickly."

"And how is that a problem, Jayce?" she pointed out, which made him laugh.

"That idea just might work, Myleena," Rook said. *"We'd have to design specialist spider units to do the job. The current models wouldn't be capable of it."*

"Yeah, but it shouldn't be that hard. You look into it tonight, I'll mess around with it a little before bed, and we'll meet in the morning and

compare notes. I'm sure between the two of us, we'll come up with something that works."

"I'll do so."

"Speaking of bionoids, you get what you need to make Cyrsi's?" Jason asked.

Rook nodded. *"She sent me a detailed description and desired measurements,"* he answered. *"I'll have it ready by tomorrow morning."*

"She'll be the first CBIM that has a bionoid almost right off the bat. I wonder if that's going to make her develop differently than the others," Tom mused.

"It might," Jason nodded. "The CBIMs say that the sensory experience in a bionoid is way different than their sensors, both less accurate and more intense. We'll see how it affects her development when she sees the world the way we do before she gets comfortable seeing it through her sensors."

"I love that hologram she picked out," Jyslin said. "It's adorable!"

"She does seem to have an eye for aesthetics," Jason agreed. "We'll see if she develops into as much an artist as Cyvanne is."

After eating, Jason and Jyslin answered a rather demanding message from Dahnai and headed over to the Summer Palace. Dahnai had had Rann and Shya brought over after school, and as Jason and Jyslin came out to the pool deck from the landing pad—there was a path directly to it from the main landing pad—Jason saw that Dahnai had cleared out the Grand Duchesses. Rann and Shya were in the pool with Sirri, playing with a Terran beach ball of all things, and Dahnai and Kellin were laying on loungers near the house. Standing at regular intervals along the edges of the deck, in their white Crusader armor but without their helmets, were the Imperial Guard, along with Mai and Brae from Rann's own guard detachment, their black armor making them stand out.

This may as well be Dahnai's living room at the Summer Palace. She spent almost all her free time out here on the pool deck. It made him wonder sometime why he bothered to build the rest of the compound. But, then again, it shouldn't be much of a surprise. Dahnai liked being outside, and that was a luxury she didn't really get to indulge back in Dracora. Her

outdoor areas at her main palace were surrounded by walls and defensive emplacements, almost making the pool, courtyard and gardens off her apartment more like the exercise yard of a prison. Here, there were no boundaries, no feeling of being enclosed or constrained, where the view past the pool and lawn leading down to the beach was a picturesque view all the way to the horizon well out to sea. She felt *free* here, so she spent as much time as she could enjoying that freedom.

[About time you got here,] Dahnai noted. *[What were you doing?]*

[We can tell you now. We brought up the new CBIM,] Jason answered.

[Oh really?] Dahnai asked with sudden interest, sitting up on the lounge, a move that made her impressive bare breasts jiggle a little bit. *[Think I can meet her?]*

[Sure. Cyrsi,] he commended openly. Seconds later, a camera pod floated over, and a hologram of Cyrsi projected out. “Cyrsi, this is her Imperial Majesty, Dahnai Merrane, ruler of the Imperium. Dahnai, this is Cyrsi. She just came online today.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Cyrsi,” Dahnai said, looking up at the waifish hologram.

“It is nice to meet you as well, your Majesty,” she replied.

“Dahnai, Cyrsi. When things aren’t formal, call me Dahnai.”

“Dahnai,” she corrected with a slight nod.

“How are you finding things on your first day?”

“There is much to do. Much to learn,” she answered.

“And how do you *like* it, Cyrsi?” Jason asked pointedly.

“I...am intrigued,” she answered. *“There is much more to things than what my programming suggests. I find myself most curious to discover those mysteries.”*

Programming? Dahnai sent, most likely using standard telepathy so Cyrsi wouldn’t hear it. *I’ve never heard a CBIM talk about programming like that.*

She's a newborn, Dahnai, programming is her only experience right now, he answered. She needs time and experience to move beyond her personality template and find her place in things.

It certainly shows. The other CBIMs don't act like computers. She does.

"Do you have a bionoid yet?" Dahnai asked her.

"Tomorrow," she answered. "I've piloted the maintenance bionoids in the inventory to learn how they work from the inside, but I've been told that the bionoid being made for me is much different from them."

"Very different," Jason agreed. "Maintenance bionoids don't have the sensor mesh system and biorhythmics."

"I'm surprised that one of the other CBIMs didn't let you borrow theirs."

"They can't," Jason told her. "Each bionoid is hard coded so only its owner can operate it, including the bionoids used by the CBIMs and Coma. That makes their bionoids *theirs*."

Dahnai looked at him. "I think that's a good idea," she told him. "I'd almost feel, well, *violated* if someone else used my bionoid."

"Yes, and it keeps Cyvanne from getting any ideas." Jason noted dryly.

"Hey!" Cyvanne protested from the same camera pod Cyrsi was using.

Jason gave Dahnai a sly wink, which made her burst out laughing.

Dahnai decided to chat with Cyrsi a little while, get to know her a little bit, but Jason certainly wasn't bored. Sirri realized he wasn't otherwise taken, so she swooped in and grabbed him, then all but dragged him out onto the exercise area, where four Gladiator exomechs were standing, two painted red and two painted blue. This was where Saelle trained Sirri and the guards, using real Gladiators. "Come *on*, Uncle Jason!" she said, tugging at his hand. "Saelle won't let me PIM unless there's a rated rigger with me, and she's busy with the babies! I wanna get more practice!"

"Good grief, are you pushy," he teased as she pulled him towards the line of exomechs. "You can use the simulator, you know."

“I don’t like the simulator, because it’s just that, a *simulator*,” she said firmly. “No matter how good it is at pretending to be the real thing, it’s *not*. I want to learn under the same conditions that I’ll be using it!”

Jason was a bit surprised to hear that. It was almost the exact same excuse Kyva gave for her distaste for simulators. She felt that no simulator could ever truly duplicate the conditions of *being there*.

“Alright, alright. But you can’t pilot it naked, silly,” he chided. *Someone go get Sirri’s armor and bring it to the exercise yard*, he sent openly across the compound.

I’ll have it there in just a moment, your Grace, one of the guards answered.

We’re gonna need two more, he called. *Who wants a couple of logged hours in a Gladiator?*

It didn’t take long to get two extras, and after Sirri armored up, Jason sat at the observation table and merged up into one of the four Gladiators—he didn’t have his armor with him, so he couldn’t PIM—as Sirri and two of the Imperial guards saddled up in the other three Gladiators and brought them online. [*Wow, I didn’t know you could do that!*] Sirri blurted over shortrange tactical.

[*I have more practice than you do, silly,*] Jason told her from the Gladiator. [*I’ve told you, you don’t need a merge pod. They just make it more comfortable. We’re not doing any combat, so I don’t need the safety systems in a merge pod.*]

Sirri was still learning the nuances of controlling a mecha through a merge, and the best way for her to learn how to completely control her exomech was by making her use it, use every single part of it. That was best done in training for a girl her age not through combat simulators, but through *sports*. Jason picked up one of the Gladiator-sized batchi sticks out of a rack close to the table where he was sitting, picked up a ball, then lobbed it into the net of his stick. Saelle used batchi, Terran soccer, and Shio *shiziki* to teach Sirri how to move her exomech, how to control it with exacting precision, because playing about any sport was all about body control and muscle memory. And for that matter, what she learned in her rig

would translate to her own physical body. She was learning body control and muscle memory through her rig.

[Alright, I think it's me and Jae against you and Pola,] Jason said. [If only because Jae got into the other blue Gladiator. That kinda makes her on my team by default.]

[I get to pick teams, Uncle Jason!] she challenged.

[Fine, but you don't get me. I can't kick your butt all over the field if we're on the same team. That would make me lose, and I don't like losing.]

[That sounds like a challenge, Uncle Jason,] Sirri retorted.

[That's a promise, silly,] he shot back lightly. [It's your fault for getting into the red Gladiator.]

[Alright then. Pola, let's kick his butt.]

He couldn't deny that he had fun. They spent nearly two hours out on the exercise yard playing two on two batchi, and he didn't stomp Sirri quite as hard as he promised. She was new to rigging, but she knew how to play batchi, and that made a big difference. Jason did push her, press her, made her play as hard as possible, and every minute of that kind of intense activity just helped her learn, made her a better rigger. It was practice for Jason as well, as he practiced Kellin's little trick, trying to control his physical body while he was merged to the Gladiator. As he suspected, practice increased his skill with it, and he'd been practicing at least an hour a day since Kellin showed it off. He was now at the point where he could keep aware of his physical body, his eyes open and his attention focused on watching the exomechs play while he presented more than enough challenge to Sirri and Pola. Trying to get up and walk around would have unraveled him, but that was his eventual goal, to be able to walk around in his physical body while driving a merged asset.

Faey weren't the only hyper-competitive little snits on Karis. Kellin could do something Jason couldn't, something *cool*, and by God, he was going to learn how to do it too.

He'd made real progress. As long as he kept the split controlling his body passive, tried not to move too much, he was able to use his senses, carry on an intelligible conversation, even send and commune while he was

merged to something. Motion wise, he could manage some movements, like gesturing with his arms while talking, but for some odd reason, whenever he tried to move his legs more than just a little, he lost it quickly. Something about moving his legs messed with his split. Intense sensory stimulation also jacked with his split, so something like a loud sound, bright light, or getting smacked or feeling pain caused him to lose his merge. But it was marked improvement from just a takir ago, when he couldn't even so much as twitch a finger without losing his merge.

So, Jason was sitting at the table, chin on his hand and drumming his fingers on the tabletop as he watched himself play batchi in a Gladiator And while he looked bored, everything he was doing was a very deliberate exercise, practicing to expand his ability to control his body while merged to a rig. They were there long enough for people to come look for them, mainly in the form of Dahnai. She padded up and put a hand on his shoulder, and he looked up at her. *[Hey baby. What are you doing?]*

[Schooling Sirri,] he answered, pointing to himself bulling into Sirri's red Gladiator with his mecha's shoulder, which made her fall on her metallic rump. He then snapped the batchi ball to Jae on the far side of the field when she put a pretty impressive move on Pola to get open. Jae spun and sent a sizzling shot at goal, and Sirri, who was controlling the blocker, didn't react in time.

[You're merged?]

[Yup. I'm practicing Kellin's trick.]

[You're getting pretty good at it,] she communed with admiration in her thought.

[Nine to four, game point,] Jason teased over shortrange tactical.

[That just means I get to knock you down six times before I win, Uncle Jason,] Sirri threatened as she got back up.

[Bring it, little girl,] he taunted, twirling his batchi stick as he walked back to the center of the pitch. Since he scored, that meant that Sirri would get the ball at the center circle.

[Sirri's getting plucky,] he told Dahnai. They could hear shortrange tactical, but they couldn't understand it. It was modulated and encrypted

commune. And thanks to the Pai, all KMS military commune was now modulated at the very least to prevent anyone who could understand organic commune from picking anything up. Anything sent ship to ship or ship to site was encrypted.

[She's the Crown Princess. She'd better be plucky,] Dahnai replied.

They watched the action on the pitch, and to Sirri's credit, she wasn't going quietly. She managed to score on them, stopped them from getting the winning point, then came right back down the pitch and scored again in quick succession. *[Ha! Nine to six, Uncle Jason!]* she taunted, pointing the net of her batchi stick at him. Since Dahnai was watching, she was now communing organically, so her mother could hear.

[You still have four to go,] he told her lightly as they walked back to the center of the pitch to restart.

[So? Against you, that's gonna be a snap!] she dug.

[Who won the first three games?] he challenged.

[Doesn't matter. It's the last game that counts.]

[I see you have that Imperial self-delusion thing down,] he teased, then almost lost his merge when Dahnai smacked him on the back of the head.

Jason felt that Little Miss Overconfidence needed a lesson. So, when they restarted, he passed the ball to Jae and then broke his merge with the Gladiator after programming its AI to walk up and down the pitch slowly, like marching, a simple "go here and then go back to where you started and do it again until I tell you to stop" command. He then reached across the island and found what he was looking for, and that was Saelle's Titan. She left it in standby mode to keep the tactical in it online, and Jason exploited that. He used his authority as the Grand Duke to override the pilot lockouts and merged to it, then brought it out of standby. After a very quick systems check to make sure it was ready to go—Titans were far more complex than Gladiators—he activated its flight pods and picked it up off the landing pad.

He wasn't sure what was going on at the pitch, because a Titan took too much of his attention to even try to maintain enough of a split to be aware of his physical body, so when he flew it up and over palace, he got a look at Sirri exploiting the fact that Jason's Gladiator was just puttering along to

score a goal. The three other Gladiators stopped and looked towards his, then one of them looked up when the Titan came fully into view. Jason landed it right in front of Sirri as she took her position for a restart, and her mecha looked up at the Titan. *[Saelle, we're in the middle of a game,]* she warned over shortrange tactical.

Jason had his Gladiator walk over by issuing commands to its AI, then he took the batchi stick from it. And in the hands of a Titan, it was like a toothpick.

[What are you doing, Saelle?]

[Who said this was Saelle?] Jason asked cheekily.

[Uncle Jason! That's cheating!] she accused.

[It is? I don't seem to recall any rule saying I couldn't substitute my mecha for another one,] he replied flippantly as his vacated Gladiator walked off the pitch, back to its assigned parking spot. *[And I think we just started.]* He knelt down and flicked Sirri's Gladiator with a single finger—*gently*, since she was inside it—and that made it stagger back and fall on its backside. He then stepped right over her and took five sweeping strides down the pitch, then poked the end of his batchi stick, holding the ball, inside the net. *[Game and match,]* he declared smugly.

[Uncle Jason, you are a rat!] she accused hotly as she got back onto her feet. *[You were just afraid I was gonna win!]*

[You're the one who was so confident just a minute ago. Wanna go again? I'll even spot you nine points.]

Sirri threw her batchi stick at him. Saelle's Titan was not impressed.

He put Saelle's rig back on the pad and ended his merge, then stood up from the table as the other three returned to the parking area to dismount their rigs. Sirri smacked him in the side when he came up to her after she got out of her Gladiator, and he just laughed and put an arm around her armored shoulders. "You are a jerk, Uncle Jason!" she accused.

"All day every day," he agreed mildly. "But it did teach you one thing."

"And what is that?"

“That when it comes to a game, or politics, or combat, you’d better expect the unexpected. Or you’re going to lose,” he said seriously.

She looked up at him with a bit of surprise.

After that little adventure, Jason rather enjoyed a dinner on the pool deck with his family (which included Dahnai’s family in his mind) and Saelle, but also with one uninvited guest. Somehow, Kreel had talked them into having him over, and he was sitting with them at the table, wearing nothing but those Bermuda shorts he adored so much, chatting away as he enjoyed some fine cooking from Dahnai’s chefs. But, just as the day before, the coming evening meant that Jason had to go to work. Yesterday it was a conference with Zaa, but tonight, it was something a little different. And this time, *he* was the one that was going to get to use the nexus bridge.

He stepped out of the swirling energy of the bridge wearing his armor but without his helmet, and he stepped from one metal deck to another. This deck was the massive landing bay of the KMS command ship *Novarra*, and out of the open bay doors was the gas giant and moon system of the quadrinary system, Prakka. The gas giant was Prakka-21, and in orbit around it were the life-sustaining moons that would be their foothold in this galaxy. The ship was part of a task force that was currently sitting picket duty in Andromeda, though it was about to return to Karis to undergo the IP armor refit. It had already been refitted with a drive, which was how it had gotten out here. The *Novarra* was one of the newest of the command ships, but it was a familiar face that stepped up and greeted him, Admiral Jaiya Karinne, captain of the vessel. “Jason,” she said warmly, kissing him on the cheek. “You have a little mustard on your mouth.”

He laughed. “I just came from dinner,” he said, cleaning off the offending condiment with his armored finger. “Everything ready?”

“As soon as the Denmother arrives,” she nodded.

“I can’t believe they finished it,” he mused, looking out of the open landing bay doors. Out there, just barely visible past Prakka 21-X, was the Stargate. It was one of the two largest Stargates ever built, a Stargate with a diameter so large that a small *moon* could pass through it. And that was more or less what it was designed to do.

They were here to bring the super-ship Zaa wanted to refit to Kimdori Prime. That was where the second gate was located, out on the edge of their star system where the mass of the super-ship wouldn't disrupt the orbits of any of the celestial bodies in the Kimdori star system. They would activate the gates, and after about 51 hours, they'd be brought up and the super-ship would be sent through it. Then they would take the gate apart and take it back to Skirasis and rebuild it there. The sister gate would be dismantled and moved to interstellar space between Terra and Proxima Centauri, just outside Terra's interdiction in an area that was prepared to take all that sudden mass but not allow it to affect the gravitational balance between the two stars.

They were going to use the gates to get all the captured super-ships at Skirasis to Terra, and from there, the empires that owned them would tow them home.

Because of the size of the gate, this one had a different configuration than most. Every other Stargate was built as a circle, a ring, with the gate inside of it. The size of the gate they were forming was too big for that, so this one was a set of three rings set at specific distances, arrayed one inside the other inside the other, which would project their gate not completely inward. They would project on a vector inward and just slightly forward, and if the math was right, that would form a stable wormhole directly in front of the ring system.

They already knew that this alternate gate configuration would work. The research arm of KDC, the newly formed Karinne corporation that built Stargates, had already built a scale model of this configuration. It worked perfectly but wasn't ideal for standard Stargate sizes due to the power consumption. The CBIMs all agreed that the math said that it would scale up to what they'd built here, and as soon as Zaa arrived, they were going to find out if the math matched the reality.

They didn't have to link a Stargate to know if it worked. Bringing it up and preparing it for a link would tell them if the House of Karinne and the Kimdori had just wasted four months and nearly twenty *billion* credits researching, designing, and then building this thing. They'd split the cost of this between them since both of them had plans for it after it was used here,

and even with it cut in half, it was a bill that nearly made Kumi cut off his ears.

Jason looked back when the beacon was activated again, a nexus bridge formed, and Zaa stepped into the landing bay. She had Grun with her, and the two of them hurried up to where Jason and Jaiya were standing. “Denmother, you’re late,” Jason teased.

“The cubs were being difficult,” she apologized. “Is that it? It is, I see it. Most impressive,” she said, looking out the landing bay doors.

“We’re about to find out if we wasted a lot of time and money,” Jason grunted. “But, even if it fails, it’s not a total loss. We can use the modular sections they used to build it in other Stargates.”

“How many people are in it now, Jason?” Grun asked.

“Nearly thirty thousand,” Jason answered. “But the operational crew when it’s active is only going to be about four thousand.”

“Still, quite a few,” Grun noted.

“Stargates take a lot of people to keep them up and stable, Denfather,” Jason said absently.

“How many crew are in a standard Stargate?” he asked curiously.

“Operations people, about a hundred,” Jason answered. “But there’s security forces stationed in them too, so the total is close to a thousand.”

“Ah.”

“There is no reason to dally,” Zaa said. “Jason, order your people to activate the gate.”

Jason looked over to Jaiya and nodded, and she put a finger to her interface. “I’m sending the order now,” she announced.

Jason had some camera pods come over to project several holograms out for them, zoomed view of it from several angles as well as displaying the gate’s output telemetry, so they could see what was going on from a technical standpoint. He accessed the gate’s internal comm channel, and they listened in as the gate’s lead engineer took control. “*All gate generation sections report in,*” the engineer called. “*Power generation, you*

are a go. You are a go. Keep an eye on those outputs, ladies, you know how newly laid conduit likes to jerk before its settles in.” Jason watched the telemetry and saw the 168 different singularity plants in the three rings activate, then the power began to build. *“Primaries are charging. Primaries are charging,”* the engineer called. *“We ready to bring up the main exchangers?”*

“We’re a go, boss,” came the reply.

“Gate control, get ready for main startup,” the engineer warned. *“We’re handing off to you as soon as we get full power to the generators.”*

“We’re ready.”

“Alright, we’re there. Power up the gate generators!” she barked.

“Main exchangers online. Couplers are engaged.”

“Plasma flow nominal.”

Jason watched a series of graphs on the telemetry holo that showed that the gate was starting up. It would charge its gate generation pods, and once all of them were fully charged, they’d conduct the critical tests, testing the gate generation system and its ability to link. They didn’t have to link it to another gate or even form an active gate vortex to know it worked, they could test it by bringing up the gate generators and conducting two special tests known as the *point infinity test* and the *dynamic resistance test*.

The point infinity test had each gate generator basically link to an imaginary point in space, literally the spatial coordinate [infinity:infinity:infinity]. The generators wouldn’t form an actual gate, but if a generator could link to point infinity, then the generator worked. They used point infinity because the gate generator could link to it in a matter of microseconds, and without the need for a gate on the other side to negotiate with the generator to match coordinates and form a stable wormhole. Since “point infinity” didn’t actually exist, the gate bypassed the lengthy and messy process of linking yet allowed it to test its linking system to make sure it worked.

They used the dynamic resistance test to make sure the gate generator could warp space. In that test, the gate was focused on a pinpoint of space inside its generator core and tried to warp it. If it succeeded, then the gate

generator was operational. It was a very simple test, and it was conducted multiple times when a generator was being built. In the interests of complete certainty, the test was always conducted one final time after the point infinity test to make sure the gate link system didn't jack with the targeting system in the generators.

Jason watched the power build up, and he explained everything on the telemetry to Zaa and Grun as the gate slowly charged. After nearly twenty minutes, all outputs hit full power. That was it. The gate was staged, and it was ready to be tested.

"Full power!" the engineer barked. *"Ops, you're up!"*

"Begin point infinity test," a new voice called. *"Synchronize all generators for simultaneous testing."*

"Point infinity resolved, sending it to all generators."

"Gate link staging system showing no errors."

"Maila, execute point infinity test as soon as all generators report readiness."

"Just two to go already, chief," came the answer. *"One. That's it. Executing point infinity test."*

Jason watched the link control system spike, and in a matter of seconds, he saw every generator in the system successfully link to point infinity. He pointed it out to the Kimdori and Jaiya. "That was fast," Jason said. "It's already done. The test is over, and it worked."

"All generators showing stable link. Test complete, chief," the tech reported. *"No problems detected."*

"Good. Start the dynamic resistance test."

That one was going to take longer. Jason explained what it was as the generators began the process, since they had to locate their test point, and that could take upwards of five minutes depending on the size of the generator. "So, if the generator can find and affect its test point, then they know it will work when they link the gate to another one," Grun surmised after Jason explained it.

"Exactly, Denfather," he nodded.

That test didn't go as smoothly. Five of the 168 generators failed the test, two in the outer two rings and one in the inner ring, and they watched on holos as technicians swarmed them. One generator was fixed in a matter of minutes, another was fixed in ten minutes, and a third was fixed just a minute afterward. The other two were going to be stubborn, Jason saw, and on both of them the techs took it offline and opened up its casing.

"So, those two are stopping the entire thing?" Grun asked after about half an hour. "Are there not backups?"

"That doesn't matter," Jason told him. "At any one time, Denfather, only one third of the generators are going to be up and running. They'll rotate through them in a specific pattern so they can take the generators offline and do maintenance on them without bringing the gate down. And the location of the generators matters, Denfather. The active generators have to be in specific positions with very little margin for error to keep the gate stable. So, if those two generators are primaries, it means that if they're down, then the *entire* generator string in their rotation can't be up because they'll be out of alignment."

"Ah. I didn't know that."

"Wait, 168 isn't divisible by three," Zaa noticed.

"There are a few extras. You know, actual backups," Jason told her. "The backups are kept in locations so they can quickly get them to where they need to be. They make the generator units modular, Denmother. I think they can replace a generator in about twelve minutes by swapping out the entire unit. They have to be able to do it fast, so they can get the unit back online so it can go through its rotation. But they have to make sure those backups work, so they're tested with the primaries."

"How many generators are in a standard Stargate?" Grun asked curiously.

"Fifteen. But at any one time, only three are operating."

"Quintuple redundancy," Zaa noted. "That's called making sure. And that shows the scope of this gate."

"Yup. A regular gate times a hundred." He looked at the telemetry, then chuckled. "Look at that."

“What?” Grun asked, but Jaiya saw it and whistled.

“The combined power output. What does that look like to you, Denfather?”

“A brown dwarf star,” he said, then he gave a sudden laugh. “That is a *lot* of power!”

“That’s what it takes to stably warp that much space,” Jason mused.

About twenty minutes later, the technicians were done. They closed the cases of both generators minutes apart, and Jason saw that their telemetry showed that they were now working properly. “*Dynamic resistance test complete, chief. All generators now showing full functionality.*”

“*That’s it. We’re up and running. Comm, contact our sister gate and inform them we’re ready to begin linking.*”

“*They’re waiting for us, chief. We can start anytime.*”

“*Then let’s get this going.*”

“And that’s that,” Jason said as he cut the audio, and all the holograms vanished. “The gate works, guys. It’s starting the link process with the gate at Kimdori,”

“That is a relief,” Zaa said, patting her upper chest. “So, in 51 hours, we will have the ship home and can begin converting it.”

“The math proved right,” Jaiya noted.

“Yes it did,” Jason said in audible relief. “We get the ship home, bring in a standard Stargate so the Confederation can access this system, which we won’t even have to break down, then we take both gates down and move them. And shock the hell out of the Confederation,” he laughed. “Even Dahnai’s gonna be surprised.”

“It is big,” Grun chuckled.

“How’s the shielding, Jaiya?” Jason asked.

“The Kimdori have everything set up,” she answered. “We can use grav engines around planet 21 thanks to the gravimetric dampers they installed, but we have to use sublight propulsion mode on the drive outside of it. Even trying to bring the grav engines into standby would burn them out. Because

of that, I've ordered the entire fleet to just keep their grav engines completely shut down," she told him. "That way nobody gets forgetful and has an accident that costs them a few takirs in drydock and a very angry Juma...and maybe even their command."

"Good plan."

"That should also keep the Confederation from wandering around too much. The dampers won't interfere with anyone's power systems, and they didn't even need to put in any radiation shields. The planet's magnetic field is powerful enough to bring the ambient radiation down to safe levels. It's still lethal out there, but not to the point where any ship in the Confederation can't deal with it with their own radiation shielding and armor. That's going to keep them close to the planet as well," she said with a dark little smile. "They've already been warned that wandering beyond the planet's magnetosphere will kill them in a matter of seconds."

"What about the moons?"

"They've already started building the ground bases on moons B and C, and they'll start on moon E in three days," she answered. "Songa's people have medically cleared all three moons. They're going to build a small base on moon K for the Birkons. And we've claimed moons Q and X as house assets, so there are some advance KES teams there studying them."

"Eventually all of these moons are gonna be ours," Jason said flippantly. "The others can't *get* here without us, so they're ours by default. We're just letting them borrow them for a while."

"Someone's getting some big breeches," Grun teased lightly.

"Don't hate me because I'm beautiful, Grun," Jason told him, which made Jaiya laugh. "How about the beacons?"

"We have forty of them, already loaded on hyperspace probes and built into launch pods that can make a soft landing on planets," she answered. "We can get a beacon to any point in this galaxy 44 minutes after you order it, and have a nexus bridge up ten minutes after that."

"Perfect," Jason said with an approving nod. "Have you found the Dreamer homeworld yet?"

“We have,” she answered, touching her interface and bringing up a holo. “Here. Sector V3B, astrocartography dubbed it system 01 since it’s the first system we tagged in that sector. The system is literally right on the galactic rim. It’s one of the stars that forms the rim border.”

“That’s almost as far as they could possibly get from Consortium space and keep it in the galaxy,” Jason mused.

“Which is most likely why they settled the Dreamers there,” she nodded. “The system has twelve planets in it orbiting a white giant, all twelve gas giants. There’s about 300 moons in the system, 20 of them habitable, but the Dreamer’s moon is the only one with any settlements. There are some military bases on the other habitable moons, including a pretty damn big base on moon H of planet four which looks like a major repair facility, but that’s it. Odds are, they’re there to make sure nobody else is on the moons.”

“Keeping them isolated, keeping everyone else away from them,” Grun surmised. “And we’d better include attacking those other bases in our plans for taking the system.”

“That goes without saying,” Jason agreed. “You sent any recon there, Jaiya?”

“I’ve got two frigates in the system right now,” she answered with a nod. Jaiya technically had command of all KMS assets in the entire galaxy, because she held the flag for the task force. “They’re getting us some detailed scans of the Dreamer’s moon so we can plan our attack. I think Denmother has about ten ships there monitoring their comm and conducting surveys.”

“Twelve,” she corrected.

“How many infiltrators do you have on the moon?” Jason asked.

“As of right now, 230,” she answered.

“I think I’m behind the times,” Jason fretted. “You have a basic overview of the moon?”

Zaa put a finger on her memory band, and the camera pod projected out a hologram of the moon. “It’s roughly the size of Draconis,” she told him as he looked at the image. The image showed him three continents all joined at

a single point, like the petals of a flower, surrounded by blue seas. “The planet is 1.07 gravity, 1.12 pressure, with an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere.”

Jason glanced at her. “That’s almost exactly like Draconis, at least if you’re using Karinne standard measurements.”

“I am,” she nodded. “The moon’s climate is more like Shio, however, with an average planetary temperature of 73 shuki. The moon is a Gaia. Perfect conditions for life, but little to no heavy minerals present. Due to the lack of heavier elements, the moon has developed almost no indigenous animal life beyond stemmed plant insects. No animals larger than a spider, no wood plants. It is a world of almost nothing but grass, moss, ferns, and flowers,” she noted, then the image changed to a zoom-in of a city on the moon, and that image made Jason give a double take. It was a city of small stones mortared together, with almost no vehicles anywhere. The only ones Jason could see were very small stone carts being pulled by Dreamers moving up and down the streets, almost like rickshaws. What he was seeing of their clothing did look like cotton or wool, though, so there had to be some fibrous plant available to them that produced something similar to cotton, and he noticed that everyone was covering as much of their skin as possible. Robes, cloaks, everyone was wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat or a hood, it was almost *puritan*...at least at first glance. Another angle from the camera showed him that they wore less under those cloaks, things like sleeveless vests and knicker-style pants. The cloaks and robes and hats, they looked like protection from the sun, not a means to keep warm.

A world of grass...no wonder. That meant there was no shade but what was artificially created, so the Dreamers carried their shade with them wherever they went.

“The Dreamers are kept in a state of low technology, most likely to prevent them from rebelling,” she continued. “Not only does the Syndicate deny them basic technological tools, they even deny them the raw materials they may use to fashion them. The Dreamers are an agrarian society using tools barely past the Terran Stone Age, without even wood as a resource, surviving primarily on subsistence farming, ranching of farm and food animals transplanted to the moon, and foraging. The Syndicate doesn’t help them in any but the most dire circumstances. In a way, they are like the Exiles before you found them, Jason. They’re aware of modern technology,

they just have no access to it. The Syndicate maintains a military presence on the moon, but they only permit telepathic Benga on the planet and keep them segregated from the Dreamers as much as possible, most likely for their own protection. After all, the entire Dreamer race is telepathic, so any soldier on that moon is at risk. The Dreamers don't *need* high technology weapons to be a threat," she said simply.

"But they'd be one hell of a threat if they did," Jason added.

"The only place where the Benga come close to Dreamer population is at their capitol city," she continued, causing the holo to go back to the high orbital view, and a blinking dot to appear right at the point where the three continents joined. It zoomed in again, and Jason saw himself looking at a much more modern city, a city of metal and glass with buildings climbing thousands of shakra in the air. "It has a population of approximately 600,000 Benga soldiers and administrators with nearly 40,000 Dreamers, most likely servants, or slaves. That city is the base from which the Benga search for Oracles. It also holds the largest military base on the moon, where nearly half of their mecha forces are stationed. When we attack, cousin, that is where we strike first."

"What kind of political organization do the Dreamers have?"

"Very little. Their society is based on small divisions ruled by what they call a sheriff, with no large organized political structure. It is a moon of tens of thousands of Terran county-sized political entities, and the Benga keep them at odds with each other so the Dreamers are more interested in causing trouble with rival counties than with the Benga. The main way they do this is with food," Zaa said darkly. "The population of the Dreamers is too large for the amount of food they can produce with their medieval technology, so the Dreamer counties are all but at war with one another over food. The Benga encourage these small wars, even incite them when there isn't enough strife, to keep the Dreamers contending with each other rather than unify to challenge them."

"That sounds familiar," Jason said, glancing at Jaiya. "That sounds like the Imperium, just on a smaller scale."

"We do tend to fight each other more than anyone else," Jaiya admitted.

“It’s not a surprise,” Zaa agreed. “The Dreamers would be exceedingly dangerous if they banded together and attacked the Benga, even without modern weaponry.”

“There’s a flaw in that strategy, though,” Jason noted.

“What, Jason?” Grun asked.

“They’re giving the Dreamers *practice*, practice fighting other telepaths,” he answered. “I’d bet that the average Dreamer can whip a Benga telepath’s ass because they have so much practice defending themselves from other telepaths.”

“That’s a point,” Jaiya agreed. “Nothing sharpens a telepath’s claws better than using their talent against another telepath.”

“And thus why they keep the Benga segregated,” Grun agreed. “The Dreamers have become too skilled, too *dangerous*, to allow them to be close to their soldiers. Even them being telepaths is not sufficient protection.”

“And that’s something we had better heed ourselves,” Zaa said. “The Dreamers may not see our invasion as friendly, so we had best be ready to protect ourselves from them until we can convince them that we are there to help them. And that won’t be easy because there’s no central authority. Our people will have to negotiate with tens of thousands of isolated communities that will be suspicious and defensive, and they’re not going to all react the same way.”

“Which is in itself another defensive measure the Benga probably considered when they set up their system,” Grun speculated. “If they are suspicious and defensive, it will be hard to get their cooperation.”

“We do have a trump card to play when it comes to that. Her,” he said, pointing at Jaiya.

“I get it. Faey look like Dreamers, so send us in and let us try to negotiate,” Jaiya nodded. “And our blue skin will make it abundantly clear that we’re not rivals from another village, there to trick them or something.”

“A good point, Captain,” Grun agreed. “I’m surprised that they don’t treat the Dreamers better. If they were happy and content, they wouldn’t pose a threat.”

“That’s simple, Denfather. They don’t think of the Dreamers as *people*,” Jason answered. “So there’s no reason to be nice to them any more than there’s reason to be nice to a chicken you’re about to slaughter. They treat them like animals, like livestock, so they don’t feel guilty over what they do to little children,” he bristled. “Besides, the basic mentality of a Benga is that anyone not a Benga is just a tool to use and deserves no kindness. They have like *no* compassion or empathy for others. I don’t think they even have much for their own people. They’re an entire fucking race of sociopaths,” Jason frowned, crossing his arms over his breastplate. “I think the only thing holding them together is their shared disdain for the little races and the fact that if they killed off all the others, their race would go extinct.”

“That’s an apt description, given what we’ve learned so far,” Zaa agreed darkly. “Never have I seen a race so...so *evil* as the Benga.”

“With luck, we won’t have to deal with them much longer,” Jason said. “And that’ll be a happy day in my book. I might declare that day a national holiday.”

“We are not going to get that lucky, Jason,” Zaa said grimly. “Because they will *always* be lurking in the shadows, looking for a single moment of weakness which they can exploit. You know that they will never honor any agreement they make.”

“I know, but we can always hope,” Jason said.

“Is this *optimism* I am hearing from you, cousin?” Zaa challenged lightly.

“Yeah, fuck you, Zaa,” he retorted, which made both her and Grun laugh. Jaiya was a bit too surprised to do the same.

They wrapped up the meeting, and Zaa and Grun went home using the bridge. Jason stayed behind to talk to Jaiya, walking with her along the companionways of the *Novarra* as they discussed her mission and what was coming. After Aya cleared it, Jason took a ride down to moon C and got a look at the construction of the military base they were building there, which was on the coast of a large, shimmering sea and on a grassy plain between the sea and a forest of huge trees that towered two hundred shakra tall. The tree line stopped about two kathra from the coast, probably some environmental condition that kept them from growing there, and that gave

his people plenty of room to build without damaging the forest. Jason and Jaiya walked down one of the streets already built, Jaiya pointing out buildings and explaining the layout of the base, then they stopped when what looked like a small feline creature with soft gray fur and large, luminous eyes that lacked a pupil or iris, just a solid lavender color, strutted across their path with five kittens following it. *We're calling those things tabis, Jaiya said. They're like fearless. They started showing up as soon as they started building the base, and they've been hanging around.*

They're kinda cute, Jason noted.

They're a bit mischievous, but nobody minds. Seems the tabis scare away an even bigger nuisance, rodents that have jaws powerful enough to gnaw through plascrete. So we're welcoming our new sassy gray fuzzy overlords.

Jason had to laugh. *Any other problems with local fauna?*

There's a bat-like creature that shows up at night, but they're after the bugs attracted to the lights, so they're not a threat. They're actually adorable, like those flying foxes from Terra. They look like adorable little puppies with bat wings. And there are some herbivorous quadrupeds that roam across the base from time to time, going between the ocean and the forest. Seems we built right on their usual path back and forth, and they're not detouring because we're here. They're not afraid of us, and I already ordered everyone to leave the animals alone, so they have no reason to be afraid of us.

The adult stopped and looked up at Jason curiously, its eerie lavender eyes blinking, and he just had to kneel down, take off his gauntlet, and give it a little pet. It gave a strange sound between a chirp and a coo. *Wow, that is some soft fur, Jason noted as he scratched it between her ears. Are all of them this friendly?*

More or less, Jaiya said, kneeling down herself and holding out her hand. The five little kittens advanced up and sniffed curiously at her fingertips. They've learned that people will give them food if they act cute, so they're acting cute. They're very smart little animals.

He laughed again, scratching the mother under the chin...or maybe it was the father, their species might do things differently. It might not even

have a sex, it may be hermaphroditic, or even a sexless species that reproduces by cloning itself the way the Brood Queen did. When it came to unknown species, it was best to never make assumptions.

“God, would Kyri ever go nuts for a pet like this,” Jason mused aloud.

The parent gave him a curious look, then padded over to Jaiya, took hold of one of its kittens behind its neck, then carried it over and dropped it right by his hand.

“Seriously?” he asked, looking down at the parent. “I can’t take one of your kittens, you silly thing. They’re too young. They still need you.”

It pushed its nose against its kitten, pushing it closer to his hand.

Jaiya was giving him a surprised and curious look. “I had no idea you could send to animals, Jason,” she said. “That’s a rare skill!”

“I don’t advertise it,” he lied smoothly. “Now you know why Amber loves me so much.”

She had to laugh and nod vigorously. “So, what is she saying?”

“I can’t hear what she says, I can just tell her what I’m saying,” he told her. “I haven’t learned how to understand yet.”

“Ah,” she said. “Tell her that if she’s that serious about it, well, there’s a kitten here for each of your elder kids. And I think she could go along to keep an eye on them, make sure they’re doing alright,” Jaiya said slyly. “Maya would adore a *tabi*.” Jaiya and Maya were very good friends.

“Yeah, you don’t *do* that with a vulpar, Jaiya,” Jason said with a snort. “I’d have to talk to Amber first and make sure she’s okay with it, or she might move out.”

“So, bring her over here and introduce her to the *tabis*.”

Jason was intrigued enough to do just that. An hour later, he was carrying Amber through the construction site, hunting for that particular *tabi*. He had to resort to a camera pod to hunt it down and found it on the edge of the construction site, begging shamelessly from a couple of Makati builders, trying to get a bit of their lunch. “Alright, there they are,” he told Amber. “What do you think, Amber? Think you can handle having them around?”

She looked up at him tartly.

“Rann shouldn’t be the only one that gets to have a friend like you, Amber,” he told her. “This way, you’re not competing with another vulpar, and you have some guys around you can play with when the kids are busy. And you have no problem with Evinn’s *baiba* coming around. You two play all the time.”

She gave a snorting little yip.

“You are such a little terror,” he accused with a chuckle, scratching her behind the ear.

Jason set Amber down in front of the mother—it was indeed a female, he’d learned while fetching Amber—and introduced them, then watched. The two of them inspected each other suspiciously, Amber probably feeling a tiny bit intimidated because the *tabi* was bigger than she was, then to Jason’s surprise, Amber gave a little yip and licked the *tabi* on the tip of her nose. That made her sneeze and give one of those little chirps in reply, and with that seeming stamp of approval, the mother’s five kittens ambled over and started inspecting Amber as well. Amber sniffed at the kittens, then actually licked one of them on the top of the head. “My, that looks like a stamp of approval,” Jason said with amusement. “How should we do this, then? Which do you think would be happiest with which of the kids?”

Amber looked around, then put a paw on the smallest of the kittens, which was batting at one of her two tails, and looked up at him expectantly. “Okay, who? Kyri? Zach? Sora?”

She gave a yip.

“Alright. Which should go with Kyri?” Amber turned and put her paw on the head of the largest of the five kittens. “Zach?” he asked, and she nudged the one to her left. “Danelle?” he asked, and she nudged the one directly in front of her. “So the last one should go with Aran, then?” he asked, and she gave a yip of agreement. “And what about you, mommy *tabi*? Think you’d like living with a female that watches over a lot of young ones? You’d be in a place where you’d be seeing the kittens quite a bit, even after they’re grown, and you’ll be living close to Amber. Does that bother you?”

She gave a little chirp.

“Sounds like we have a plan then. But, do we have a deal?”

The mother *tabi* chirped again, and Amber gave a consenting yip.

“Then we have a bargain,” he said, holding out his hand grandly. The *tabi* put her paw on his thumb, and he shook her paw. “Let me track down a hoverpod to carry you guys.”

So, Jason was carrying a bit of a surprise back home with him that night when he came into the house, carrying a large box. Rann and Shya were still up, watching a viddy show, and Danelle and Aria were with them. *You’re home late, Dad*, Rann sent as he came in.

“I was in an extended negotiation session with some natives on the moon I was on,” he said aloud, rather grandly, then he came over in front of them and knelt down, setting down the box. Amber jumped out, and then the kids gasped with the adult *tabi* jumped out behind her.

“Oh wow, what is that? It’s cute!” Aria said.

“This is called a *tabi*, and this one is going to go live with Maya. And *this*,” he said, picking up Danelle’s kitten, “is yours, Danny.”

Danelle’s eyes widened to saucers, and she scooted over quickly and accepted the tiny kitten from him with eager hands. “Awww, it’s adorable!” she gushed.

“Don’t worry about Amber, Rann,” he said when his son gave Amber a worried look. He knew how vulpars were when it came to other animals. “Amber fully approves of the *tabis*. I even took her there so they could meet before I brought them back.”

“I’m glad. I don’t want you to leave me, Amber,” he said with sincere emotion, wrapping his arms around and hugging her when she jumped up into his lap.

“Amber likes them, and they’ll be good playmates for her when you guys are in school,” Jason said, scooping out the other kittens. “These are for the others. Let’s see, this one will be Kyri’s, this one is Zach’s, this one is Aran’s, and this one here is Sora’s. And this one is the mother, she’ll be living with Maya,” he said, patting the adult on the head gently. “She’ll be the daycare center’s resident mascot of a sort.”

“And did you warn any of them that you brought home pets?” Jyslin asked as she came down the stairs.

“Why would I do something like that?” he asked lightly, which made her laugh. “Oh yeah. Surin, you mind going out to the skimmer and bringing back the big box in the cargo hold?” he called loudly. “The pet supplies,” he told Jyslin. “I wasn’t about to hand these guys out without giving the girls everything they needed.”

“What does she eat?” Danelle asked.

“That one’s a he, Danelle, and they eat just about anything. I found out that they like canned cat food best of all, which will make it easy for the girls to feed them. They’re nowhere near as picky as a vulpar.”

Amber gave him a snooty look.

“They use a litter box as well, so there won’t be any problems there. I’ve already got that arranged so there won’t be any accidents.”

“How’d you do that?” Rann asked.

“You forget, son, I can talk to them,” Jason smiled. “I explained everything to them, and they agreed to the rules. They were happy to, since they get to live in a house and be fed and get attention. They see life here as way better than living in the wild back on their home moon. They considered that more than a fair trade-off for living under the house rules. And I’m sure that Songa’s psiologist department’s gonna be over there in a hurry,” he chuckled.

“Why?”

“Turns out these little guys are *empathic*,” Jason said. “But it’s not very well developed. They’re nowhere near a Colonist’s ability, but they can sense basic emotional states in others, mainly centered around sensing hostility and aggression. It’s a pretty awesome evolution, they evolved to sense predators by detecting their aggressive intent. The *Novarra*’s head doctor told me about it when I brought them back to the ship. They can sense living things around them out to a range of nearly a hundred shakra, and they know if something means to do harm and if something doesn’t, so they know when to hide from something. And they don’t really have any

fear of any creature that doesn't want to hurt them. I don't think I've seen documented psionic ability in an animal species like this before."

"That is pretty interesting," Jyslin said, kneeling down and picking up one of the kittens. "So, this little guy would know if I want to hurt it."

"And if you like it or not," Jason nodded. "Which explains why it's warming up to you."

She laughed and cuddled it to her chest.

"I think that's why Amber likes them. They share some traits with vulpars," Jason mused, looking at Amber. "Vulpars are very sensitive the same way *tabis* are, but they do it with brains and observation, not an empathic sense. Amber can *relate* to the *tabis*, more than most other animals."

Amber gave him an approving little look.

"So, think your siblings are gonna like them?" Jason asked lightly.

"Oh yeah, they're gonna love them," Shya said, petting one of the kittens.

"I love mine," Danelle gushed. "I'm gonna call you Kiima," she decided, holding the kitten out so she could look him in the eye. He gave a high-pitched little squeak.

"Hmm...these little guys would be awesome security," Jyslin mused. "If they can sense living things out to a hundred shakra, nothing could sneak up on them."

"Yeah, that's what the doctors were studying on the *Novarra*," Jason nodded. "So, why don't we go take a walk around the strip and deliver these little guys to their new homes?" he offered.

"Oooh, this is gonna be awesome!" Shya said, standing up.

Chapter 2

Chiira, 29 Oraa, 4404, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Monday, 26 November 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

Chiira, 29 Oraa, year 1329 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Orbiting RJ-44-3C (Janja)

This felt a tiny bit tedious, but training was just that, training.

Shrugging his massive armored shoulders, Jason shifted a little in his box as he waited for the exercise to restart, as the Whale carrying the Storm Riders returned to its beginning point. His trusty gatling disruptor hovered beside him, waiting for him to reach out and take hold of it. It was a weapon that was quickly becoming synonymous not just with Jason, but with Titan mecha in general. They were the only mecha in the CCM big enough to carry and use those beasts, and their sheer, raw firepower was just *devastating*. Jason was quite proud of the technology of the Karinnes, but he also wasn't above using what worked, and Coalition disruptors *worked*. On top of being so effective, the weapon itself was just so fucking intimidating, a giant multi-barreled paintbrush that worked on the canvas of death and destruction.

This was their fifth run of the day, and it was getting more tedious than it was fun. They were here at Janja to practice controlled descents onto an inhabited moon, which was what they'd be doing when they went to liberate the Dreamers, and Janja was a pretty good training area. The gas giant was about the same size as the one in Andromeda, Janja's parent planet had only two more moons, so the gravitational forces at play were almost the same, and both RJ-44-3 and the Dreamer's parent planet were about the same distance from their stars. The conditions here were quite similar to what they'd be facing when they did this for real, so Janja was the

CCM's official training location for the wargames and exercises that would prepare them for the real thing.

[Reserves on the line!] Tara ordered, which caused Jason to take hold of his weapon and sling it in carry configuration, then advance down the center line. He stopped behind Tara, then turned to face the back of her Titan as two techs circled around him using the grav pods in their armor, giving his mecha a quick visual inspection to make sure it was ready for another run. He tried to ignore the two camera spinners that were also following him around, which was a bit of Kyva's revenge on him. Jason's *little secret* was out in the Confederation, and those camera pods were recording him the way he'd had Kyva followed around and recorded some years ago. Everyone now knew that the Grand Duke Karinne moonlighted as a rigger, so they were showing the Confederation what a day in the life of a Titan rigger was like by showing it from his perspective. They did protect him and the Storm Riders by having them remove their unit insignias from their mecha, else the Storm Riders might be singled out in a battle to get at him.

For this operation, Jason wouldn't be alone in his Titan. Up in the passenger cockpit was his partner for the upcoming operation, an Imperial Marine named Master Sergeant Kei Dulenne, one of the best mindstrikers in the Faey Imperial Marines and chosen personally by Lorna for the operation for both her skill and her trustworthiness to be riding in Jason's Titan. While Jason was operating his rig from Karis, she'd be up in the secondary cockpit in the head of the mecha where she'd be doing what she was supposed to do, use her talent against the enemy and also to warn the Dreamers about what was going on. And that woman had a fifty kathra range with her talent, so the odds were very good that Dreamers would be in her range when they hit the ground on the Dreamer homeworld. Kei was like Yila and Jyslin before she became a Generation, she had the raw power to be a mindbender, but she washed out of the mindbender program. And since *all* Imperial Marines had mindstriker training, they were all certified mindstrikers, she was literally a mindstriker's mindstriker. She was the *last* Imperial Marine any telepathic opponent wanted to face off against on a battlefield, and it was Marines like Kei that kept the noble houses of the *Siann* in line. So long as the Imperial Navy and the Imperial Marines could

kick the shit out of the assorted house militaries, Dahnai would keep iron-fisted control of the Imperium.

The Imperial Marines was a small world, sometimes. Kei had been stationed on Terra during the subjugation, and thus had been under Lorna's command back when Lorna was in charge of all Imperial Marines on Terra. She was in the same battalion as the strip girls, just in a rigger company instead of infantry, and she knew Saelle from when the two had gone through rigger school together. Jason even remembered meeting her once, way back when he was dating Jyslin, one of the few times she'd talked him into going into the barracks with her. And that had a *lot* to do with her being assigned to Jason's Titan. Saelle knew her, Lorna knew her, and they both trusted her.

In the Marines, every rigger company had one dedicated mindstriker per squad, to defend the other riggers in their squad from being dominated, and those were some of the most powerful telepaths in the Imperial Marines. That had been Kei and Saelle's jobs back when Saelle was an Imperial Marine. Given how much damage a dominated rigger could do to her own side, the Marines made damn sure that they had both powerful telepathic offense and defense in their exomech companies.

Among the squad girls, back when they were in the Marines, it was no surprise that Yana and Jyslin were the squad's mindstrikers. When the squad broke into units, Yana went with one and Jyslin the other.

[I've got green lights across the board up here, Jason,] she reported.
[Ready to bounce.]

[Let's hope this is the last run of the day. It's getting late, and I've got a ton of paperwork waiting for me,] he answered, a bit sourly.

[I gotta say, Jason, this is the best rig I've ever been in,] she confided as Jason grabbed the rail overhead when the Whale started shaking a little, skimming the edge of Janja's atmosphere.

[It better be, given how much we spent to design and build it,] he replied lightly.

[I almost wish I could pilot one.]

[There's always room in the Karinne Marines,] he prompted.

She communed wry amusement. *[Six years until I get my pension, and you want me to give it up? I'm not crazy. Besides, I'm loyal to my Empress, Jason. Much as I admire the Karinnes, I'm an Imperial Marine. I wouldn't still be in the Marines if I didn't believe in them, and what they stand for.]*

[Can't argue with that, I suppose,] Jason answered with admiration shimmering through his thought. *[But that means no cool toys for you.]*

[Jerk,] she accused with mirth. *[I heard that you're buying Knights.]*

[Yup, we shook them down and found them to be worth buying. They're pretty solid,] he affirmed. *[The first units should be hitting my rigger companies just in time for the operation. You rated on a Knight?]*

[Of course I am, the Marine rigger companies always get the newest equipment first. It was the best rig I'd ever been in, until today. This Titan is just too awesome for a poor Knight to compete with it.]

[Well, you're a leg up if you do ever rate on a Titan. Knights are pure merge driven, just like Titans.]

[I swear to Trelle, I don't know how we managed to drive our rigs before we got jacks,] she communed with dry humor.

[Preaching to the choir, Kei,] Jason agreed.

The red light came on, which meant that they operation had begun. *[Get ready to bounce!]* Tara boomed over STG. *[Same as before, ladies! Everyone try to land in the target area this time, Heva!]*

[That wasn't my fault, skipper!] she protested.

[Save it for the debrief. They're uploading our vectors, doublecheck your navs.] Jason did so and found that the main control computer in the Whale had uploaded a descent vector to his nav system.

[Recording hot,] one of the drone operators warned him, telling him that his tactical was now being recorded by the media people.

Not that that was going to change how he did things.

[Secure gear, get ready for bounce,] Tara ordered as she released the anchors on her Titan and stepped up to face the launch door. *[Two minutes.]*

Jason made sure he was ready, that his flight pods were active and he had his external equipment and pods ready for a controlled descent into the atmosphere, then he sounded off in his spot in the rotation to let Tara know he was ready. *[Remember, no ECDs 'til we hit the ground,]* Tara ordered. *[Run off orbital telemetry and in-rig TCAS during the descent.]* Her bay doors opened, and Jason looked past her to see the moon of Janja, a blue and green jewel with the blue gas giant behind it.

Two minutes wasn't long to wait in a Titan, because there was almost always something to do when he piloted one. After two minutes, the go signal was given from command, and Tara gave the order. *[All squads deploy!]* she barked, then she all but jumped out the bay door in front of her. Jason followed immediately behind her, and he was suddenly out in weightless space, changing his vector and sliding into formation with the rest of the Storm Riders. They were arrayed in four V formations of 11 or 12 rigs each, depending on how many reserves were attached to their squad, and Jason took his assigned position on the outside right of the formation, the assigned location of the first reserve unit. The other three squads quickly organized into their formations, and both in front of them and behind them, 17 other Titan companies launched from their Whales and did the same. Hundreds of Titans started down into the atmosphere, and Jason was too busy controlling his descent, staying in formation, and listening to the crosstalk over STG as the assorted Titan companies communicated with each other to make sure everyone held their formations and those formations didn't get too bunched up and interfere with each other. They weren't the lead formations in the exercise, there were four other companies ahead of them... but they deserved to be there. Kyva and the KBB were out in front, the Red Warriors and the Banshees side by side just behind the KBB, with the Banshees directly in front of Jason's formation. The two drones holding the camera pods stayed very close to his rig, and whoever was flying them was showing some serious skill keeping them tight in with the formation but not getting in the way. They also weren't alone long. The escorting fighters and corvettes slid into the formations, and on his wing was none other than Commander Justin Taggart of the Ghost Squadron.

Soon to be Captain Justin Taggart. He didn't know it yet, but he'd passed the Captain's Exam and had more than enough recommendations to get the rank. Juma herself was going to let him know, probably later today

or tomorrow, and he'd receive his official promotion in three days. The promotion wasn't going to change his role much, he'd still be the commander of the Ghost Squadron, he'd just have a new rank insignia on his armor and fighter and enjoy a bigger paycheck. And oddly enough, since he was a Naval officer and served on a ship, he'd still be called *Commander* because that was his job title, commander of a fighter squadron. Only the captain of a ship was referred to as *Captain* on a naval vessel. In Justin's case, it would stop being his official rank and become his job title.

The promotion from O5 to O6, or Commander to Captain in the Navy or Lieutenant Colonel to Colonel in the Army, was known as *flipping the triangle*. O5 rank insignia was a downward pointing triangle, silver if a commoner and gold if noble, and O6 rank was a triangle pointed upwards. Getting flag rank, Admiral or General, was known as *unfolding the diamond*, replacing the triangle with a diamond...which kinda made sense since a paper diamond folded at the opposite corners did look like a triangle. The lower officer ranks were represented by bars, one bar per rank from O1 to O4. So, it was a pretty big deal to reach O5, both as a major threshold in duties and as a big change in rank insignia. In the KMS, O5 was the first rung of the major command ranks. O4 ranks in the Navy commanded frigates and destroyers, commanded fighter squadrons and exomech companies, but O5 was required for cruisers, so it was the gateway rank to the big ships. In the Army and Marines, O5 was the rank that commanded infantry battalions, which was a huge amount of responsibility. It was a bit of a weird step down that Army and Marine O6's, Colonels, commanded a corvette where a Naval O4 commanded a destroyer, but Army and Marine Colonels needed corvettes to do their jobs, giving them an aerial view of a battlefield so they could see what was going on and issue commands.

In that respect, Justin had already outranked his position. Most squadron commanders were O4s or O5s not long in their rank, but Justin had started as an O4 and ranked up to O5 while commanding the Ghost Squadron. He'd turned down offers to move to command after reaching O5, staying with the Ghost Squadron. And in Justin's case, Juma wasn't stupid enough to force him out of his position. Justin was the best damn fighter squadron

commander in the entire CCM, and Juma let him stay in that role and do what he did best.

Talk about maximum safety, he wasn't about to get much safer than to have the KBB, Red Warriors, and Banshees right in front of him and the commander of the Ghost Squadron flying right beside him. But it did say a lot about where the Storm Riders fit into things that they were the first non-elite exomech company in the formation behind those legendary units. Tara had one of the most respected Marine exomech companies in the KMS, and *not* just because Jason was in it. Tara had that respect long before she took a chance on bringing the Grand Duke Karinne into her company as a reservist.

[Deceleration in 20,] Tara warned as they came down into the thicker atmosphere, as the ground got closer and closer to them. His HUD showed them in the lane, on the proper vector, and that vector was about to change as they intended to decelerate and change their descent angle. *[Mark!]* Jason stayed in formation as they started their braking maneuver and steepened their descent, and the landing zone came into view below them as they passed over a cloud. Jason expertly navigated his rig down, and it was with a bit of satisfaction that he hit the ground almost in perfect unison with the rest of the company a moment later, exactly where they were supposed to be.

But just landing wasn't the only part of the exercise. *[Deploy!]* Tara barked as soon as her Titan's feet hit the ground, and the squad moved with practiced certainty to secure the landing zone. In the real operation, infantry jumpers would be right behind them, and it was their job to secure the landing zone for them so they could disembark their jumpers without resistance. Once the infantry was down, the Titans would deploy to their first objective as the infantry organized themselves, but what that objective was, not even Jason knew yet. Sioa hadn't decided on mission assignments yet, she was still going through the intel the infiltrators and spy probes were bringing in.

Exactly 47 seconds after hitting the ground, the overseeing Army Line General declared that the landing zone was secured. *[Exercise complete. Good job, ladies,]* the General called over STG. *[That's the last run for*

today. Titans, return to your Whales, Whales return to task force formation for the return to Karis after recovery complete.]

[Much better,] Tara told them over STG. [Even Heva managed to land inside the zone.]

[Bite my ass, skipper,] Heva retorted, which caused some chuckling over STG.

[Form up for return to base. We'll have our debrief on the Whale on the way back, so everyone report to the briefing room as soon as you dismount.]

They took off again in staggered formation, each company taking its turn in same order they descended, so the Storm Riders lifted off after the three elite companies got off the ground. They stayed in formation on the trip back up, which took nearly twice as long as the descent. He came in through roof doors rather than through the launch doors, and Jason parked his Titan in its reserve spot and dismounted. Up above, Kei stepped out of the secondary cockpit, and in the mecha's upper chest, Jason's bionoid stepped out of the main cockpit doors once they opened.

Him having a bionoid in the mecha was by Tara's order. If the company was running PIM, he had to have a bionoid in his mecha. If the company was running by remote merge, *all* her riggers would have a bionoid in the cockpit. He wasn't controlling his rig through the bionoid, the bionoid was literally just occupying the main cockpit, in passive standby. She wanted a physical body inside the mecha in case the enemy could scan the units and look for pilots, plus she wanted them to have a bionoid in their mecha in case they had to exit the mecha to do an inspection or simple repair while in the field. It was also a measure of subterfuge, since a bionoid gave off life signs sufficient to fool most sensors thanks to its biorhythmics, except for Alliance and Subrian sensors, so the enemy wouldn't know if the mecha were being remotely piloted or not. And when it came to the Karinnes and the Imperium, pilots in the mecha meant telepaths, and that might be a useful ploy against a foe that had come up against Karinne and Faey telepaths before.

Dahnai wasn't the only one that deployed some pretty formidable mindstrikers in their mecha companies. The Karinne Marines also did so,

and Sioa had some of her best mindstrikers in rigs in the Army. Tara had one of the best Karinne Marine mindstrikers in the Storm Riders, Koji Karinne. Like Jyslin and the strip girls, she was a former Imperial Marine that had the raw power to be a mindbender, and she was one *scary* skilled mindstriker. Only four other mindstrikers had higher scores than her, and those four were in the ultra-elite mecha companies. One was in the KBB, one in the Banshees, and two in the Red Warriors.

And naturally, the highest rated mindstriker in the entire KMS was in the KBB. Lieutenant Hai Karinne, a woman who could give Yana a run for her money when it came to raw power. She was one of the most powerful non-Generation telepaths in the house. Kyva had taken the rare step of taking her into the KBB when she wasn't an insanely skilled rigger purely for her mindstriking skills, and then they trained her to be an insanely skilled rigger. Hai was every bit as nasty as every other member of the KBB, but she had the added benefit of being able to melt her opponent's brain.

Kyva was a marvel when it came to training riggers. She'd turned Symone into a *complete monster* in a rig and did it in just a few years. Symone was actually one of the highest rated riggers in the KMS, but he'd never tell her that. She had enough overinflated ego problems as it was.

He and Kei walked down the center line towards the briefing room, joining other Karinne Marine riggers and Imperial Marine mindstrikers, chatting about the training exercise and the upcoming operation. "So, any inside info on when we're shipping out, Jayce?" Another of the Imperial Marines asked as they walked, a tall, very cute Faey woman named Amarae.

"I'm as in the dark as you girls are," he replied honestly as he carried his helmet. The Imperial Marines didn't treat him like a ruler, they treated him like a comrade, a fellow rigger...and that was the way he liked it. Besides, to them, it was far more important that he was the husband of an Imperial Marine than the Grand Duke Karinne. He was *one of them* by virtue of that marriage. "All I really know right now is that they're still ironing out the battle plan, and that's not my business. I'm no strategic genius like Lorna and Navii. I let them do the planning and I do what I do best. Blow shit up."

Several of the girls around him laughed. “You are good at that,” another Storm Rider agreed, Lanva.

“So, you girls enjoying your bionoids?” Jason asked.

“It’s amazingly awesome,” Amarae gushed. Jason had gifted moleculartronic bionoids to all the Imperial Marines attached to the Storm Riders. It was part bribe, part token of appreciation for their discretion, keeping the fact that he was part of the company to themselves. “I have mine at home, I can pop over and see my husband and girls whenever I’m off duty.”

“Are they gonna upgrade these rigs before we ship out?” Lanva asked.

“As soon as we’re done here,” Jason affirmed. “Next time we do exercises, they’ll have the IP upgrade.”

“Outstanding,” Lanva grinned. “How many are getting upgraded?”

“*All* of them,” he answered. “No rig leaves Karis without being refitted to IP.”

“They’re doing that for our rigs now,” Amarae said eagerly. “I can’t wait to try it out.”

“I’m surprised they worked up a refit procedure for Knights that fast,” Jason mused. “It took them almost a month to work it up for the Titans.”

“Titans are bigger than Knights,” Kei noted lightly. “And have more armor sections.”

“True,” Jason nodded. “Plus, they had to work out how to make it compatible with the shields.”

“I keep forgetting those monsters have shields,” Kei said, looking up at Tara’s Titan as they walked past it.

“Yup, we just don’t run them very often, since they draw a fuckton of power and we can’t fire through them when they’re up. But they’re lifesavers when you’re staring down the throat of one of those fucking Syndicate antimatter missiles.”

“Fuck, I remember those fucking things from SB-39,” Amarae shuddered. “If I hadn’t have ducked, it would have blown me to molecules.”

The fuckin' thing blew a hole three decks high in the hull of the Skaa ship I was on."

"Yeah, we had our own rude awakening with those things," Jason grunted as Tara and her Imperial Marine partner joined them, the commander of the unit, Captain Damia. "We lost nearly half a company to them the first time they unveiled them. Remember, that, skipper?"

"I'd like to forget it," she answered.

The debrief was thankfully short, and Tara didn't really have to chew anyone out. They'd all done tons of orbital launch exercises before, so this was basic stuff to them. They finished up the briefing just as the Whale returned to Terra after jumping from Janja; Whales were now the smallest KMS vessels with a jump engine, thanks to Naval Engineering going in and figuring out a way to put a frigate jump engine in one. There were currently only five Whales with jump engines, and there would only be about 20 more. Due to the jump engine, The Storm Riders' Whale now had a crew of six Naval personnel dedicated purely to ship operations, the XO, two navigators trained for hyperspace jump operations, and three engineers that would also be trained to work on Titans so they could help out the ground crews when not needed for the ship. Juma had decided that at least a fair number of Whales needed jump capability due to the emerging importance of the Titans they carried, allowing Titan companies to jump with the task force without needing to be towed or to use a catapult. That gave them range and flexibility, but it also introduced a new element of risk, since Whales were comparatively easier to cripple and capture. That was why not every Whale was going to be upgraded, only a select few representing the elite of Marine exomech companies. The rest of them would be towed in or catapulted in like before. And when those drive-equipped Whales were in a combat theater, they'd take special precautions so they couldn't be captured, by exploiting the drives to stay well away from the enemy but still close enough to respond to a launch or recovery call in seconds.

When they were back on the board, both the Storm Riders and their new jump-capable Whale, the *Tempest*, would be *badasses*.

It had also caused a minor redesign of carriers. Before a carrier could carry up to 500 operational fighters, twelve fighter squadrons and 20 spare fighters, with additional extra space was usually taken up by fast attack

craft, sensor dropships, and a couple of mecha companies for carrier defense. But now they would carry a full Titan company in addition to their fighter complement, so they had been reduced from twelve to ten fighters squadrons to add in the carrying space and support infrastructure for 40 Titans. They still carried other mecha and had space for fast attack ships to land, but every carrier now had its own Marine Titan exomech company for operations where a Titan fit the battle plan better than a Wolf.

On paper. They didn't have the riggers trained yet to fill those companies. But when they did, everything the company would need to be operational would be in place on the carriers and waiting for them.

But for Jason, he went from what he liked to do to what he had to do. He delinked from his bionoid after stowing it on the Whale and opened his eyes, finding himself back in his office. Rivlin poked his head into the merge pod and put a hand on his forehead. "All your signs are normal, your Grace," he said. "Feel free to get out as soon as you shake off the merge."

Such a difference from the first time Rivlin monitored his merge.

After shaking off the merge, he returned to the boring duties of the Grand Duke, which was a whole lot of paperwork. He'd gotten behind on it due to all the exercises the last few days, drilling in preparation for the Dreamer operation, and things were moving fast both inside and outside the house. The refit operations had begun for the entire CCM to upgrade to IP armor, so Kosigi could be best described right now as being in a state of frenzied chaos. They were refitting the big ships in Kosigi, and they had so many of them stacked in there that ships were parked in the usual traffic lanes and doing the refits without a dock. But docks weren't really needed for this refit, since everything was being done on the inside and there weren't any real heavy pieces of equipment to move in and out except for one, the IP waveform generator. Cargo dropships were scrambling all over the moon's interior delivering emitters and cabling in an insanely complex dance that Cynna was orchestrating.

That was Kosigi. There were similar scenes playing out on almost every military base on Karis as well, as they started refitting virtually everything else. Military cargo dropships, Merchant Marine freighters, Whales, fast attack craft, jumpers, and exomechs all had to be refitted as well, and they were doing those on the planet to keep that additional chaos out of Kosigi.

Anything they could refit on the planet was being done on the planet, to keep the extra work out of Kosigi, and that extended all the way to the Navy and Merchant Marine. Anything smaller than a KT-1200 freighter was being refitted on the planet, and so were Naval line frigates and destroyers, since both could make landings on the planet. Frigates were being refitted anywhere on a military base where they could land, and destroyers were lining every seaport in every city on Karis, where they'd be refitted from a waterborne dock. Joint Base Alpha was a madhouse right now because they were doing all corvette, gunboat, and KMM KT-1070 and smaller freighter refits there, so they had fighters and fast attack ships and tugs and freighters parked virtually anywhere they had room for them while teams did the refits. Joint Bases Beta and Gamma were covered with frigates, and Joint Base Delta had so many Gladiator and Juggernaut mecha parked there they had them sitting on top of a couple of *buildings*. Anywhere they had room, anywhere there was enough flat space to park a mecha and had enough room around it to do the work, that space was being used. They were just putting airskin rain shields up over the workspace and getting to it. The Whales and all Titans and the new Knights would be done at Joint Base Epsilon, just outside Jaxtra on Kirga, which was the operational headquarters for Army Special Maintenance and there was a pretty big planetside facility for Naval Engineering there as well, giving them the resources and support they needed for the work. ASM did all their major work there, and Naval Engineering did a lot of testing of fighters and mecha there.

So, right now, Karis and Kosigi were madhouses, and their chaos was being mirrored all over the entire Confederation. Everyone was rushing to upgrade to IP armor, both for the assets they were committing to the Andromeda operation and for their own fleets. There had to be *billions* of emitters being produced every day across the Confederation, and there was a sudden supply crunch on datalines and power conduit...which Kumi and the Imperium weren't above exploiting a little bit, since they could replicate silicon. Karinne's mining and resource supply corp, KMF, and several large-scale production companies in the Imperium were making a killing right now in the intergalactic silicon market.

At least everything looked to be on schedule. Jason went over all the projections from both the operations side and the supply side, and there

were no major snags. Trenirk was keeping factory production up to meet the demands to stay on schedule, Jrz'kii was keeping all the logistics running smoothly to move those supplies to where they were needed, and those two were keeping everything on schedule.

He finished up the last of his paperwork and the two meetings he had, then he decided to wander home. And thankfully, that meant that he didn't have to call in a corvette or beg the guards to open the door for him. He slung a backpack over his shoulder and walked out in his tee shirt and jeans, and while he did have two guards with him—Aya wasn't going to *completely* let him go like that—they were along for the ride more than anything else. Shen and Suri filed along behind him as he headed for the VIP pad that was very close to his office, where his hovercar was parked, and the girls veered off to get on their hoverbikes rather than ride with him. Aya would even let him drive his car by himself. Everyone else was already home by the time he landed on the pad behind the house, setting his hovercar down beside his Nova, and he got the car in under the airskin canopy just as a fairly strong storm started dumping rain on the strip. The canopy of the *oye* tree high above partially deflected that rain, but it also caused some large drops to fall down from the canopy as the rain collected on the golden leaves and then dripped off of them. The rain meant that most of the kids would be inside, so Jason walked in through the kitchen and into a pretty crowded living room as all the elder kids were occupying just about all the furniture as they played a game on the vidlink.

Really. They were starting to get way too comfortable sitting around on the couch playing vidlink games. But, then again, if it wasn't raining, odds are they'd all be outside playing. They spent too much of their day sitting behind desks taking lessons to waste their free time sitting down. "Hey guys," Jason said, carrying in a cup of coffee, speaking aloud for Aria's benefit. "What's up?"

"Just waiting for the rain to stop," Rann answered. "We were teaching Aria how to hoverboard down at the park."

"Cool. You like it, Aria?"

"It's hard," she said. "But kinda fun." Aria had become almost exactly what Jason had expected. She'd spent so many years laying in that bed that she didn't want to sit down, or even sit still, unless she had to. She'd almost

fully recovered from the atrophy of her body, and now she spent almost every waking moment not spent in school doing something, and the more physically active it was, the more she wanted to do it.

She still had a ways to go, though. She had the physical strength and endurance now to play with her brothers and sisters, but those years of inactivity had made her somewhat awkward and clumsy. She didn't have the years of practice controlling her body the way most kids did, so in many ways, she had the motor control skills of a six-year-old. She was literally learning how to control her body with grace and finesse. But that didn't stop her from trying, and that was what he admired most about her. Despite being so bad at most sports, despite having the motor control skills of a six-year-old, she wasn't afraid to get out there and try. And the more she played, the better she got, showing that she could overcome her developmental disadvantage with some hard work and determination.

"They need to put an airskin canopy over the board park," Zach complained.

"Airskins aren't cheap, Zach," Jason chuckled.

"Then why is there one over the landing pad?"

"Because Mommy Jyslin is a weenie," he answered, which made Rann splutter out a laugh.

"I'd like to hear you say that when Pamma is here," Shya teased with a grin.

"You can't prove I said anything," he replied flippantly, which made her laugh harder. "I'll be up in my office if you guys need me. I have a few loose ends to tie up before I'm done today."

Don't get lost up there, Jason, Ayama warned from the kitchen. We'll be eating in about half an hour. Hopefully before the rain lets up so the kids can go back to the park with full bellies.

"I shouldn't be long, at least I hope not," he answered. "What's on the menu?"

Can't you smell it?

"I'm not a vulgar, woman," he retorted.

“It smells like pizza to me,” Aria said absently, biting her lip a little as she concentrated on the game.

Jason gave Aria a sudden look and saw that Rann was grinning broadly at him. *Stand up and sing the drunken monkey song, Aria.*

“What? What is that?” she asked, looking at him.

“Well, well, well,” Jason said dryly as Rann gave a bright laugh.

“You woke up, Ari!” Shya blurted. “Dad was *sending!*”

“It’s about time, girl, I was starting to worry about you,” Jason chuckled as he advanced into the living room.

“Wait, you mean I expressed?” Aria asked in surprise, and when Jason nodded, she gave a scream and started jumping up and down in excitement. She knew exactly what that meant in Faey society. She gave Jason a huge hug, then accepted hugs and kisses from the others.

Everyone, Aria just expressed, Jason warned the strip, his sending vibrating with pride and happiness. So keep the chatter down until Ryn can teach her to close her mind.

I’ll be right over, Jason, Ryn answered quickly, just before a torrent of congratulations rolled across the entire neighborhood, both inside the strip fence and outside.

“I heard that! I heard that!” Aria squealed in delight, looking up at him.

“Looks like your return to the board park is postponed, my little treasure,” Jason smiled down at her. “You’re not going anywhere until you can close your mind. And why don’t you tell your Pamma about it? I bet she’ll drop everything and race home.”

“She will,” Rann laughed.

“Okay!” she said, putting a finger on her interface. She didn’t need to be jacked or be a telepath to send a message to Jyslin over the biogenic network, she just couldn’t hear the reply without a jack. The interfaces they used for children and the unjacked fixed that by putting the response up as text on a one way hologram for her to read, or if they weren’t worried about it being personal, they could play it as audio over the interface’s speaker.

All it took to send the message was command thought, and she'd mastered that aspect of using an interface.

[WHAT? She expressed and I wasn't home?] Jyslin complained to him.

[Your loss,] he teased lightly. *[So, you coming home now?]*

[As soon as I can, me and Frinia are going over a few things.]

[Bring Frinia along, I haven't seen her for a while.]

[Frinia's busy, she can't come. I'm glad we have her passing party all planned out already,] Jyslin laughed. *[And now we can put those plans into action!]*

[Let's hold it on New Year's Day, we can have the party in the morning after we do presents then go to the batchi match in the afternoon. That should give everyone the chance to get over here.]

[Plus, I think it's a bit of poetic justice that we celebrate her birthday on the most important day of the year.]

[Yeah, until Aria starts feeling shorted because her presents are for both her birthday and New Year's Day,] Jason noted with wry amusement. *[I think we can make that work, though. It'll be pretty tight, and we might have some issues with a few of our visitors given they'll have their own celebrations to attend, but we can figure something out.]*

[Dahnai?]

[Yeah, she has all those official ceremonies in the morning, but given the time difference between here and the Imperial Palace right now, I think she might be able to manage it. She just went home, and now she'll be coming back here,] Jason noted with amusement. *[But there's also Yila, Anya, and Carissa, and outside the Imperium, there's Zaa, Sk'Vrae, Enva, Kreel, and Krirara,]* he expanded. *[I think Gau and Shakizarr both mentioned something about wanting to attend as well. I'd better find out before we make any plans, I don't want to snub either of them.]*

[We'll figure it all out when I get home,] she assured him.

Jyslin got home just as they were about to sit down for dinner, and the first thing she did was bury Aria in a huge, crushing hug. "I'm so proud of you, my girl!" she gushed.

“Aww, I didn’t really do anything, Pamma,” Aria answered modestly.

After that was out of the way, they spent dinner and a good three hours afterwards putting their plans into motion. They decided to hold the party at the batchi stadium, in the VIP conference rooms, sitting with Surin at the dining room table with holograms up of the conference room layout, planning how they were going to set the decorations. They got RSVPs from Dahnai, Anya, Yila, Carissa, Kreel, and Krirara while they were planning out the logistics of the party, and Zaa got back to him just as they were wrapping up to confirm. Sk’Vrae called right after Zaa did to confirm as well, which left only Gau, Shakizarr, Holikk, and Enva to go from the list of rulers that had expressed interest in attending the passing party.

Quite a few telepathic leaders. Then again, they would understand the significance of expression in a society like the Faey.

Holikk got back to him just as they finished up their plans and ordered the supplies, and to his surprise, both Shakizarr and Gau had answered that they were going to attend. Gau he could see because it might have to do with an omen, but he was still a bit curious as to why Shakizarr wanted to come to the party. Jason and Shakizarr weren’t exactly close. They were passingly good acquaintances, Jason liked him after a fashion, and they had a lot of respect for each other, but they weren’t really friends.

It had to have something to do with Aria being a Dreamer. That was the only real explanation.

Enva was the last to get back to him, after he went up to his office to finish up the last of his paperwork. She opted for a personal contact rather than a missive, which was her custom, so Jason brought up a flat hologram of the alluring Sha’i-ree, hanging just on the far edge of his desk. Enva was visible from the navel up in the hologram, showing off her perfect bare breasts, and she looked a bit sweaty...and Jason wasn’t sure he wanted to know why. “I just got your message, Jason, and I’d be happy to come,” she said in her husky voice after they greeted each other, her cat-like green vertically slitted eyes narrowing slightly as she smiled. “I adore Aria. She’s a delightful little girl.”

“I can’t argue with that,” he said as he leaned back in his chair. The door opened, and when he saw nobody there, he shifted in his chair so Amber

could come around the desk and jump up into his lap. It was indeed her, but she was leading a bit of a procession, a small adult female tabi with light sorta pinkish-lavender—or maybe lavenderish-pink, it was kinda hard to tell—colored fur not too far from the color of her eyes and two kittens, one with ghost white fur and the other with dusky pink fur with a splotch of violet at the base of its neck, just forward of its shoulder blades.

The tabi was the newest member of the household, and she was there not because Jyslin or Aria or the kids wanted one, but because Aya *demand*ed it. Aya had seen what the animals could do, understood just how powerful it was, and immediately ordered a tabi to be found and put into the house as an additional layer of protection. She had literally talked Amber into allowing one to be put in the house, through Jason, to the point where they took Amber back to Prakka and allowed her to find a tabi she liked and could live with to bring home. The tabi was literally a guard animal there to detect any hostile intent that came close to the house, additional protection for the house and the strip.

And she wasn't the only one. There were 23 tabis on the strip now, 13 of them pets for the strip residents and ten tabis owned by the guards to protect the strip...but still pets. The guards were already quite attached to their partner tabis, even if they were considered working animals. Tabis were intelligent and easy to train, and Aya was pioneering a program to bring tabis into the Imperial Guard as service animals, the same way they used giruzis to patrol the grounds of the Imperial Palace.

The adult was going to stay at the house, and in a way, she was *Amber's* pet. Amber chose her, so in that respect, she belonged to Amber more than anyone else in the house. The two kittens were already claimed by Dahnai for Sirri and Maer, and they'd be going to their new homes when they were weaned. That would be in just a takir or so, according to the biologists that had been studying the tabis.

"What an adorable little creature," Enva mused when Jason leaned down and scooped up the two kittens, holding them in his hands while the adult jumped up onto the desk with Amber. Amber gave Enva a slightly hostile look, which made her laugh softly. "You already know that I think you're adorable, Amber," she smiled. "I'd love it if you left Jason and came to live with me," she added with a naughty wink.

Amber gave her an insulted look, turning her nose up pointedly as she flicked both of her tails with impressive scorn. That made Enva laugh.

“These are called tabis,” he said, holding up one of the kittens, then he set both of them on the desk with their mother. They immediately started to play, and Jason had to keep an eye on them so they didn’t roll off the desk in their mock battling. “We found them on the moon over in Andromeda where we’re building our forward base.”

“They’re Andromedan?”

He nodded. “They’re very unusual little animals. They’re the first animals we’ve ever encountered with psionic ability.”

“Truly?”

He nodded. “They have an empathic sense that lets them sense hostility around them, the ability to sense malicious intent. It’s how they avoid predators. Aya brought them into the house because of that, at least after Amber gave her permission,” he said with a smile, reaching down and scratching the vulpar between her ears. “Sure, they’re cute and we like them, but this little lady here is as much a guard animal as a pet,” he explained, patting the mother tabi on the head gently. “If an assassin breaks into the strip looking to kill someone, the tabis will sense it, and they’ve already been trained to warn a guard if they do.”

“Amazing!” she gasped, then glanced to the side. “Perhaps, Jason, you might give me one of the kittens? To have something like that with me, it would make my security detail very happy. And they’re absolutely *adorable*,” she gushed.

“The kittens are claimed, Dahnai wants them for Sirri and Maer. I suppose we could get you another one, but it’s not quite as easy as just scooping one up,” he said. “The adults are something like vulpars in that they’re picky, Enva. You have to find one that *likes* you, or it’ll just run away. The tabi has to choose you as much as you choose the tabi. The kittens aren’t nearly as picky, but we’re not gonna just go over there and steal some tabi’s kittens. They’d sense it as malicious intent and hide from us. But, as long as you approach them the right way, you can convince a mother to give up a kitten, as long as you’re sincere in your intent to love

and take care of the kitten. They're *very* protective over their kittens, we've learned."

"Then might you arrange to take me to Andromeda? I'd love to go there to see Prakka, and you and me can find a tabi or two for me to bring home. I'd prefer an adult tabi to a kitten, so we don't have to worry about convincing a tabi to give up a kitten. We can bring Dahnai, Kreel, and Krirara with us, make a road trip of it. I think it would be fun."

"Actually...that might work," he mused. There wasn't anything over there that Jason had to keep hidden from the Confederation, not since they'd moved the super-ship Zaa wanted to Kimdori Prime. "The Stargate is up and running, I wouldn't mind checking up on the progress over there, and Dahnai did say she wanted to go to Andromeda. I'll talk to Lorna about it tonight, she's coming to see Jyslin and have dinner. If she says it's safe, then I'd say it's a go."

"The bionoids make—"

"We can't use bionoids," he warned. "The tabis can't sense anything from them, so they're afraid of them. They're afraid of anything they can't sense, which is actually a good thing because it means they're afraid of the machinery we have on the moon and they stay away from it. We have to go over in person. But we're not depopulating the moon of tabis, Enva. You can bring home *two*," he stressed, holding up two fingers.

"Two is all I need. And it would be a bonus if I can get a breeding pair," she smiled.

"Just be careful about that. A couple of my biology people found out that going over there to get them just to breed them is something they see as malicious intent. They can tell if you don't have their best interests at heart."

"I want the kittens the adults produce for my children, Jason," she smiled. "They would absolutely adore having a tabi, and I would not mind at all having something like that protecting my babies."

Given Enva had six children, she'd need a lot of kittens. But her kids weren't exactly babies, with her youngest having just turned fifteen. Enva was much older than she looked, but that was entirely normal for Sha'i-ree.

They aged quite gracefully and didn't show the effects of that age until they were elderly.

"Then they'd probably let you take them," he predicted.

After arranging her trip to Karis for the party, she got off the comm to get other business done. Jason picked up Amber and petted her while the mother nursed her kittens right on his desk, showing a vulpar-like arrogant belief that they owned everything. "We're going to need a name for her eventually, you know," Jason told Amber, scratching her behind the ears. "Since she's *your* tabi, it's more or less your call."

She gave a throaty little yip.

"Nobody's gonna be able to pronounce that," he chided.

She squeaked commandingly.

He laughed. "Now you're just being mean," he teased. "If you're not gonna be serious about this, then I'll name her."

She gave a haughty little bark.

"That's not bad," he commended. "You've been watching Terran cartoons again, haven't you?"

She gave a shameless little yip.

"Alright then. From this point forward, her name is Twilight," he proclaimed. "You like that name?" he asked the tabi.

She gave him a slow blink, then gave a little *mrowr*, proving her species was definitely related to conventional felines. Her species was her moon's version of a feline.

"Then that's all settled. Congratulations on your new name, Twilight," he proclaimed, reaching over and patting the tabi on the neck and shoulder, being careful so he didn't disturb her nursing kittens. "And did you *have* to do that on my desk? I'm using it."

She gave him an amused look.

"Yeah, you're gonna fit in around here," he predicted darkly.

Kaitha (New Year's Day), 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 28 November 2018 Terran Standard Calendar

Kaitha, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Karinne Sports Complex, Karsa, Karis

It was a good thing that the convention rooms in the KSC were suitably huge, because there were a *lot* of people filling them.

They'd rented out all six of them and taken down the temporary walls, which created a gigantic cavernous chamber under the luxury skyboxes in the stadium, with one wall made up of glass panes that overlooked the pitch below. The giant chamber was fully decorated for Aria's party, and the room was absolutely filled to capacity with friends, family, and honored guests. From Aria's classmates in school and their families to rulers of hundreds of star system, they all rubbed shoulders together as they celebrated the "triple crown" of sorts, Faey New Year's Day, Aria's newly established birthday, and Aria's first major step into adulthood in Faey society. As near as Songa could figure, Aria was biologically about 15 years old, so it was officially her 15th birthday today, which was also something of a milestone in that it marked the ancient custom of Faey nobility. At 15, a noble son married as a child left his house to move in with his wife, so in a way, the age of 15 (actually 14, damn those Faey and their need to tack on an extra year) was seen as the age of adulthood among Faey nobility. The actual legal age of majority was 25, but ancient noble customs put the age of majority at 15, and nobles were anything if not set in their ways. Not even a thousand-year-old law dissuaded them from their idea that 15 was the age of majority...at least for them.

Jason wasn't about to let that idea sink into Aria's head. She'd been denied her childhood, and he was going to let her be a child as long as she wanted to be one. She may be physically 15, but emotionally and developmentally she was more like 7 or 8. She did have the education of a 15 year old thanks to being inserted with all the education she would have received by now, but she didn't have the experience and chance to grow and

mature since the day the Benga killed her parents and put her into her own private hell.

She'd settled into school much better than Jason expected. She was placed in 10th grade, which was middle school on Karis, and she'd attend that school until she graduated from the 13th grade at age 18. Then she'd go on to primary school and be there for seven more years. And after that, she'd go to the Academy and earn her graduate certificate in her chosen field.

And that was a *huge* difference between Faey education and Terran education. To be honest about it, the Faey were one of the most highly educated species in the entire Confederation. They mandated graduation from primary school, they started at age 5 and stayed in school until age 25 on the average, so a Faey child went to school for about 20 years before they finished their compulsory education...and even then it wasn't over for most, since they went on to academy-level education, which was the Faey version of college. Academy level graduates had 25 years of academia under their belt when they received their certificate (equivalent to a bachelor's degree), and doctorate holders had been in the education system for close to 35 years. And to be honest, they needed it. A society as technologically advanced as the Faey required its people to have a very high educational base.

All he wanted was for Aria to be happy, and so far, she seemed to be. She really liked school so far, even though she'd only been there for 17 days, she'd made quite a few friends in her class. She felt normal, with a family and friends and a life, and for her, it was just pure heaven, everything she had ever wanted. And now that she'd expressed, she was right about where she needed to be, given that most of her classmates had expressed already. Aria had expressed a little late compared to the average Faey, but that was most likely because of her unique circumstances. Ryn had reported that Aria was a fairly strong telepath, stronger than the average telepath but not so strong that she stood out, and probably would have expressed around age 11 or 12 had she had a normal childhood, where the average age of expression for a Faey girl was 13. For boys, it was 14.

But, given she lived in Jason's house, there was no doubt that she'd be one of the most *skilled* telepaths once she was fully trained, even if she

wasn't as strong as most of the others on the strip. Ryn wasn't about to let her go around untrained, and Ryn's idea of *competent* was far, far more than what Faey society considered competent. After just two days, she'd learned how to close her mind, she could send with some impressive clarity for a neophyte, and she'd learned how to send privately, but she had a long way to go. Just two days under Ryn's tutelage had already produced results.

So, even though it was only noon on Karis, the kids were almost exhausted from all the excitement. They'd opened presents that morning, and since it was Aria's first New Year's Day, Jyslin had maybe gone a little nuts with the presents. That was in addition to all the gifts she got from others, including some from Dahnai...and Dahnai was rich enough to make those gifts impressive. After presents, they had the usual holiday breakfast, then went visiting their neighbors, which was also a New Year's Day tradition. Then they came home, got dressed, and came to the KSC for Aria's party and the batchi match afterwards, where Aria got even more presents. And a few of them were quite eye-opening, since now she was getting presents from galactic rulers, and the practice of gift-giving had evolved into something of a competition between the rulers over the years, competing to see who could give the best gift. Not necessarily the most expensive one, but the most *interesting* one that also happened to be useful in some fashion. Then again, given it was Jason's daughter, there might be a little bribery involved in some of those extravagant gifts, trying to curry Jason's favor by showering his adopted daughter with expensive presents.

One thing was for sure, Aria had come out of today like a bandit. She'd gotten so much stuff that it wouldn't fit in her room, and she'd gotten some pretty expensive gifts, like a hoverbike the same model as Rann's, some expensive jewelry, and other very expensive toys and gadgets. She would have gotten even more extravagant gifts had Jason not warned everyone not to get exotic, so no yachts, no exomechs, no skimmers, nothing she couldn't use right then and there. And given she'd been growing so rapidly and would outgrow any clothes she was given in a matter of takirs, he warned everyone against getting exotic with the clothes. Clothes were fine, but nothing super-expensive, since she wouldn't be wearing it long, at least unless it was made out of memory fabric.

The party was starting to wind down as Jason stood with her at the window overlooking the pitch, as kids ran around laughing and Grand

Duchesses sat with galactic rulers at the table of honor and talked politics. Down below, the groundskeeping crew was putting the final touches on the field for today's match, playing the Methris team, whose name translated most closely into English as the Maniacs.

Really, Jason *loved* some of the IBL names. They all tried to be powerful and intimidating, and a name like *Maniacs* almost seemed silly, but silly in an awesome kind of way. The word actually was a kind of hard to translate into English because it had a nuanced, layered meaning. It did mean *maniac* in the kind of way a Terran English speaker might expect, but in Faey, it also meant *driven*, *single-minded*, in a martial kind of way. The words *zealot* or *fanatic* maybe might get closer to the true definition, but those words intoned a negative feel, and it wasn't meant to be a negative state. It was meant to be a good thing, like the most devoted fan or someone so devoted to one of the Faey gods that their piety was beyond reproach. In a sports sense, it referred to a team, or fans, that were utterly devoted to their team and to victory. The Maniacs were in their division, and the Paladins were fighting for top seed on their side of the bracket in the playoffs, so this game *mattered*.

And that was the talk of the entire IBL. With Jason bankrolling the team and Frinia helping Jyslin run it, the Paladins weren't just contenders this year, they were the favorites for their side of the playoff bracket. Just four years ago, the Paladins were the basement dwellers of the IBL, and now they had a 12-3 record and were jockeying for the top seed in the playoffs. They'd had great coaches and a solid organization, they just didn't have the money to contend with the uber-rich Highborn owners for prime talent. Well, the House of Karinne's deep pockets fixed that, and now the Paladins were a force to be reckoned with not just in their division, but in the entire league.

It was because they were leading their division that they were playing today. On New Year's Day, the leaders of the eight divisions played a match, flexing their schedule so their next scheduled game was played today, and making the match a home game for the division leader...though that didn't matter this time, since it was originally supposed to be a home game anyway. It made sure that the best teams in batchi were on the viddy on such an important day, so it was a huge honor to be playing a home game on New Year's Day.

This was also going to be Aria's first batchi match she was attending in person. The Paladins had played three straight away games since she was well enough to go out for extended periods (and going 3-0 in those games, so they were on a roll), so this was the first match that Aria was medically cleared to attend. And they were going to do this the best way possible, and that was front row seats on the center line, right behind the Paladins bench. Jason would have liked her to be on the sideline during the game, but the IBL had strict rules about who was allowed on the sidelines during a match. Jason and Jyslin could be on the sideline because they were the listed owners, but they were the *only* ones allowed down there. They couldn't even bring their kids. So, Aria was going to get the next best thing to being on the sideline, and that was the best damn seats in the stadium. Jyslin would be on the sidelines with Frinia, Jason sitting with Aria, the elder kids, and Kreel and Krirara in the front row, and the rulers and other important people would be up in the luxury skybox. Jason had offered front row seats for all the rulers, but only Kreel and Krirara had accepted. The rest of them wanted to watch the match from the luxury of the skybox.

Actually, Dahnai had wanted to sit on the front row, but her guards didn't think it was secure enough.

"When does the game start?" Aria asked eagerly as she put her hands on the glass and looked down.

Aaat, you won't get better if you don't send, Jason chided.

I'm getting tired of sending, she answered, her thought lucid enough for her growing annoyance to bleed into her thought. *It's all I've done for two days. It's harder than talking.*

That's how you get better, Jason told her. *It's going to get easier and easier, my little treasure. Sending is a skill, and like any skill, the more you practice it, the better you get. And I have to say, you're getting pretty good at it.*

She did spare him a smile for his praise. *When does the match start?*

Two hours. They'll be letting people into the stadium in about an hour, he answered. *You excited to see the match?*

Yeah, it's a pretty fun game. It goes almost too fast for me to keep up with it.

I'm just glad you like baseball too. Baseball is from my home planet.

I see why Rann loves it so much. It's just fast enough to keep you interested but slow enough to understand what's going on.

Are you sure you just expressed two days ago, little whisker? Kreel challenged playfully as he came up behind her, then grabbed her by the waist and hefted her up and over his head to settle her on his shoulders, showing off that deceptive strength possessed by all Grimja. He was wearing a very Terran style tank top and those Bermuda shorts he loved, so he in no way looked like a galactic ruler. Seriously, Kreel had a love affair with Terran style clothing. Aria gave a startled sound and then a laugh, leaning over to look down into Kreel's eyes. *You send really well for someone with just two days of experience.*

Pam hasn't let me talk at all since I expressed, she answered, almost accusingly.

Jason, you meanie, Kreel grinned over at him.

It's how you learn, he replied shamelessly. *It's getting a bit cloying in here, Aria. Wanna go down and see the pitch while we're still allowed? We just have to be careful not to mess up the lines.*

Sure! She agreed.

I'm in for that, Kreel added.

So, while the others were sitting around talking or eating the last of the cake, Jason and Kreel took Aria down to the playing pitch. One of the groundskeepers came over and chatted with Aria, explaining what the lines were all for, then he let her draw the back line behind the hovering goal, which she really got a kick out of doing. And she did a really good job, making the line completely straight, and it joined up with the other section of drawn line perfectly.

I think she's found her calling, Jayce. She's an aspiring painter, Kreel noted lightly as they watched her push the line tool with the groundskeeper watching closely.

She can be anything she wants to be, Kreel. She's earned that right, he replied seriously. *After the hell she went through, if she wants to spend her entire life sitting on the couch watching vidy, then that's exactly what*

she'll do. Thankfully that's not what she wants to do, though, he chuckled. She can't stand sitting still. She's happiest when she's outside doing something.

I can imagine, he agreed soberly. After years in that bed staring up at the ceiling, the last thing she wants to do is be reminded of it.

Well, she was asleep the entire time, but yeah, I know what you mean, he nodded. I'm glad everyone bought her so much sports stuff, it'll keep her busy for at least until her next birthday, he added with a laugh. Something tells me that she's gonna be athletic her entire life. She may even go into sports as a profession, either as a player or as support, like a coach or trainer.

They didn't get out of their little excursion unscathed. An IBL official stormed out and challenged them for being on the pitch before the game, and they were effectively kicked off the pitch. Jason took Aria over to the locker room to meet a few Paladins players before the match, just not getting in anyone's way or being intrusive, since the girls were mentally preparing for a match, then he collected up the kids and Krirara and they went down to their seats just before they opened the gates and let the spectators in. The teams came out for warm-ups as the kids settled in, and it seemed that almost as soon as Jason had them send some snacks and game programs down from the luxury box, the match was starting.

And it was totally worth it. The Paladins showed why they were first place in the division, scoring on the Maniacs within the first minute of the start of the match, a midfielder stealing an attempt to pass the ball up the pitch and running a fast break the other way to score, and they never looked back. The Maniacs didn't allow themselves to get blown out, hanging in there and keeping some tension and drama in the game, and that kept the game highly entertaining. The closest they got to tying the game was getting the score to 15-14 in the middle of the fourth division. That just woke the Paladins up, and they scored four straight goals to pull away, then eased up a little in the final minutes of the game. They won 20-16, and the entire game had been a blast to watch.

Did you like it, Aria? Jason asked as the entire stadium stood and sang the Paladins theme song as the players jogged a lap around the pitch,

waving to the fans before heading for the locker room, something of a new tradition since moving to Karis.

It was better than watching it on viddy! she answered, her thought excited and joyous. *Aunt Yila got me a batchi stick, I've got to try this out next time Dara's here!*

I think you just lost her, Jayce, Kreel grinned over at him.

I got her a baseball glove and a soccer ball, and Rann loves baseball, Jason replied, his thought competitive. *Besides, the Karis Planetary Baseball League starts its season next takir, so we'll have Bombers games to go to. I'll prove that Terran sports are superior.*

Not everything is a competition, Jason, Krirara chided lightly.

You don't live with a Faey, he replied sharply.

I think that might be a good thing, Krirara smiled as they started collecting their stuff, getting ready to go up to the luxury box.

They lingered at the stadium for nearly two hours, and that tested Aria's patience a tiny bit. She didn't like just sitting around, and their very important guests made it hard for Jason and Jyslin to easily disengage and take her home, where she'd have plenty of time to try out some of her new goodies before the big traditional New Year's dinner. Ayama, Surin, and Seido had been working on it all day, so there was no doubt that it would be huge, and it would be good. Rann and the other kids kept Aria distracted as Jason did his best to get his visitors to go home.

Eventually, Jason wore them down, and they collected up the kids and headed home. Dahnai headed back to Draconis so she could do some of the boring Imperial ceremonies celebrating New Year's, so it was just the family that landed on the pad behind the house. He saw that they'd set up the deck by the house for the dinner, since it was going to be Jason's family and Tim and Symone's family eating together. New Year's was about family, about celebrating it as a family, and Tim and Symone were part of Jason's family. Every girl on the strip was celebrating it with her own children and maybe a very, very special guest, such as Meya inviting Jenn. The late morning was set aside for visiting friends, but the New Year's dinner was meant to be about one's family.

No matter how much Meya proclaimed she was born to be single, Jason had the feeling that she wasn't going to be single much longer. She and Jenn had been an item for nearly a year, and he knew from talking to them that they were in love with each other. And as far as Jason was concerned, it was about damn time. The girls needed to get married, to enjoy everything life had to offer, and he actually didn't like it that much that none of them seemed to have found husbands since they moved to Karis. He had this hope that if Meya finally broke that ice and proposed to Jenn, that it would spur the other girls to get much more serious about their assorted boyfriends. It wasn't like the girls didn't go out and socialize. All of them except Kumi and Yana had a serious relationship with a man, at least different degrees of serious. Meya seemed to be the most serious with Jenn, but even Aura, who enjoyed her relationship with Jason, was dating. She was about ready to move on with her life and find another husband.

They came into the house and greeted the other members of Jason's family that had been invited to the dinner. The six CBIMs, Rook, and Coma had their bionoids in the living room, sitting around and engaging in casual conversation with Tim and Symone as Lyra played with the tabi kittens. The mother was sitting well away from the bionoids, because they had no sense of presence to her psionic sense, and that made her fearful of them. Jason had talked to her, explained what bionoids were, but it hadn't sunk in yet.

As far as he was concerned, Cybi, the CBIMs, and Coma and Rook *were* part of his family. As the Grand Duke Karinne, he was the closest thing to real family they had. And today was going to be something of a momentous occasion for all of them but Rook, because he'd finally perfected the new gastric system and had upgraded their bionoids, giving them ability to eat. Myleena's idea of using specially designed spiders that would break down solid food into a liquid that the bionoid's systems could handle had turned out to be the perfect solution to the problem.

And some of those spiders were currently sitting in a lab in MRDD. His people were studying the potential of *weaponizing* them.

It was a little interesting to see them all sitting together, scattered across two couches and two chairs. Cyra's bionoid was the tallest, Cybi's was the most perfect imitation of the First Generation, Sora Karinne, and was

wearing a very stylish frock and leggings. Cynna looked the most like Cybi, but her hair was more bone white than silver, and she dressed very differently, wearing a very Terran tee shirt and pair of cargo shorts. Both Cyvanne and Cyrsi looked like younger adults...in Cyrsi's case, almost like a teenager, and both of them were dressed as such. Cyvanne was wearing a *Blood Nugget* shirt and wearing all the accoutrements of a Faey young adult going through their goth phase, even wearing the ear caps. Cylan had opted for a more muscular frame for his new bionoid, mirroring his interest in Vanguard to make himself look more like a soldier, and was wearing a sleeveless shirt and a male style thigh kilt. Cyvanne's hair was a riot of colored stripes that reached her shoulders, and Cyrsi's hair was short, raven black, in one of the more common Faey pixie styles that made her look a bit of a tomboy, and was dressed like a Terran goth rather than a Faey goth, complete with the black lipstick and a clip-on nose ring. Coma still looked like a clone of Jyslin, though her new bionoid's hair was Saelle's charcoal gray, and Rook had stayed with his metallic skin, something he truly favored, and wearing his customary jumpsuit.

Eight machines...but eight *living* machines, six of which were living through those machines by remote. Nobody that interacted with any of them, even Rook, had any doubts that the CBIMS, CBMOM, and Rook were *alive*. And those seven machines were as much a part of his family as his children were...because in a way, all of them, even Rook, *were* his children. He was the one responsible for their welfare and safety. He was the one that had taught a few of them about the art of *being* from a biological organism point of view. He was the one to which they came when they had personal problems and needed advice. He was their father, after a fashion, and he was just fine with it.

And one of them was very much still a child. Cyrsi would be done with her probationary period in a few days, and she was ready to take up her responsibilities. She was starting to develop her personality, and most curiously, it was very *youthful*, much like the bionoid and appearance she had chosen for herself. She was programmed to be curious, but in her case, her curiosity was focused on things that had nothing to do with her job or her status as a computer, and Jason had a suspicion that her access to a bionoid almost from birth had caused it. She had a nearly child-like curiosity about the universe, and more than any of the others, she saw the

magic in the wonders of time and space, the dance of planets and moons around a star. When she looked at something like the gas giant hanging in the sky on the moon Janja, she looked up at it with the same wide-eyed wonder as Aran, who was by far the most scientific of all his kids. To her, life and the universe were grand things to explore to the best of her ability. All the CBIMs had the same curiosity, but not to the same extent she did.

Because of that, Jason had assigned her as the primary CBIM in service to the KES, where her curiosity about the universe would be best served. After all, that was the job of the KES, to go out there and explore it.

She also loved baseball more than batchi, so that put a few more points in her column, as far as Jason was concerned.

“Here you guys are,” he said as he came in, then reached down and scooped up Amber. “When did you get back from the stadium?”

“About an hour ago, no way were we gonna sit around and listen to you guys talk,” Symone grinned. “I was gonna help them with the cooking, but they threw me out.”

“They know better, they know you’ll eat more than you help,” he answered, which made her laugh. “I’m surprised you guys didn’t bring your bionoids to the party.”

“Rook was doing some last-minute checks on them,” Cybi answered. “But they’re ready now, and I’m quite looking forward to this.”

“Eating?”

“Yes. I’ve always been quite curious about it, and why some cultures, like the Shio, are so focused on it.”

“I guess you’ll find out why as soon as they set the table,” he chuckled as Rann and Shya came up behind him, and Shya pushed him out of the doorway with her hands on his lower back. “Hey now, pushy girl,” he accused.

“You’re in the way, Dad,” she protested, pushing him fully into the room.

“It’s my door, I can stand in it if I want to,” he replied flippantly.

“And I can push you out of it when I want to,” she replied immediately as she sat down on the floor in front of the couch, sitting between Cybi and Cyra’s legs. Rann joined her seconds later, and the two of them zoned out as they merged to their gestalts and no doubt started playing a game of some sort.

“Kids,” Jason sighed, coming over to stand by the couch, beside Cybi. “Anyway, it’s just an expression of enjoying the senses, Cybi. Besides, if you’ve gotta do it, you may as well make it as enjoyable as possible. And you guys get to have all the fun. You can eat all you want and not gain weight.”

“Not quite. I didn’t make the stomachs very large, just to prevent that kind of excess,” Rook warned. “Anything we eat is essentially wasted, so I don’t want us gorging on food that could be used to nourish those who need it.”

“How are you handling getting rid of the food?” Jason asked curiously.

“The food will be liquefied by the spiders and flushed into the liquid evacuation system. From there, it’ll be handled like any other liquid the bionoid expels, be it water or lubrication fluid.”

“So, you pee it out, as I expected,” Jason mused, giving Cybi a slightly amused look. “Ready for rainbow pee, Cybi?”

“Why am I not surprised you’d make a joke like that, Jason,” she accused with a slightly sour face.

“Actually, I installed units to color all waste to more accurately match biological urine, to make the bionoids seem more natural,” Rook elaborated. “Remember, Jason, it’s all about the bionoids being able to blend in with living things and having bright orange urine might make the bionoid stand out.”

“Well, that’s forward thinking, I suppose,” Jason chuckled, putting his hand on Cybi’s shoulder.

Jyslin came down the stairs, carrying Jon. “Dinner ready yet?” she asked, rocking her son a little.

“Just a little while longer,” Seido called from the kitchen.

“Good, because I’d like to get through the meal as much as I can before one of these little party crashers gets any ideas,” she smiled lovingly down at the infant, who reached up a tiny hand towards her face in reply.

“They eat?” Jason asked.

She nodded. “Julia’s already down for a nap, but Jon’s being Jon,” she chuckled, lifting the boy enough to touch her nose to his, which made him give a gleeful sound. “He’s going to be a holy terror when he’s a toddler, I can see it coming. He’ll never want to take his nap,” she winked down at him.

“Where are the girls?” Jason asked.

“Out on the deck, Aya’s watching them,” she answered. “They’re playing with a couple of simplas boxes.”

Jason had to laugh. “No matter how advanced we get, kids still have a fascination with boxes,” he said.

“So, you guys ready for your big event?” Jyslin asked them.

“This will be my first New Year’s dinner,” Cyrsi noted. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Mine too,” Cynna added. “I’ve long looked forward to this holiday.”

“And what did you guys give each other?” Jyslin asked.

“Clothes and decorations mainly,” Cybi answered. “There’s not much that we need, so we decided to dress up ourselves and our apartments.”

That was definitely a thing for all of them. The CBIMs all had personal apartments in their facilities for their bionoids, a place for them to *live*, to learn what it was like to just hang around the house and whatnot. Rook had his house not far from the strip, and Coma both had quarters for her bionoid aboard her ship and had an apartment in the harbor district of Karsa, which Jason could admit had an awesome view of the port and ocean given that it was on the 117th floor of the Maira Building. Coma had rented the apartment without the landlord knowing she was the CBMOM, trying her hand at living completely anonymously among the Karsa population.

Jason could respect that kind of adventuring spirit.

Cyrsi's apartment in her facility up in Virga was still a little sterile, but she was starting to get the hang of it, so it was slowly starting to take shape as her personal space. For the first couple of takirs she didn't make any changes to it at all, but then she finally put up a *Metallica* poster of all things, after delving into the Terran musical archives and coming across the heavy metal band. She'd added a few pieces of art and a few new pieces of furniture since then. All of them had an apartment in Karsa in addition to their apartments in their facilities—except Coma and Rook—and Cyrsi's apartment in Karsa was almost completely bare. All she had in it was a vidlink and a chair. She didn't see any reason to decorate her Karsa apartment when she hadn't finished her apartment in her facility.

"Well, then I'm glad we went safe and got you guys clothes," Jyslin winked. "It's hard to shop for the computer that has everything, you know."

"Jason bought me a spice rack," Cyra said, looking at him. "What am I going to do with a spice rack?"

"Plenty now, but when I bought it, I thought it would look nice in the kitchen in your apartment downtown," Jason answered.

"I never go in there."

"Well, it's going to look fabulous whether you look at it or not," he replied airily, which made Jyslin laugh. "Besides, it was cheap. That was the most important part of it to me."

Cyra gave him a cool look, which made Cybi nearly giggle.

"Hey, you seen how long the list is I have to shop for?" he protested. "I'd go broke trying to buy nice things for everyone. Be glad you got the spice rack instead of a spatula."

Aria wandered into the room, carrying a baseball glove and a ball, and looked over the assorted bionoids before coming over to Jason. "Hello, Aria, did you enjoy the match?" Cybi asked.

"It was really fun," she replied as Jason set Amber down, and the vulpar bounded over to Rann and climbed into his lap. "I was going to go down to the beach while we're waiting for dinner, will you show me how the baseball gloves work?"

"Just who are you asking, Aria?"

“Anyone that wants to give them a try, I guess,” she replied. “It’s kinda hard to throw a baseball by yourself.”

“I’ll give it a try. I’ve never thrown a baseball before,” Cyrsi spoke up, standing up.

“Just be careful,” Jason warned.

“I will,” she promised, stepping over. “How do you put on the glove?”

Aria showed her, showing no trepidation at all over it. She knew what the bionoids really were, and surprisingly, she didn’t have a problem with it. In fact, she and Aria had struck up something of a weird friendship over the last couple of takirs. Both of them were still learning the nuances of living on Karis, and they’d more or less bonded over their shared experience. “Ah, okay. So, we toss the ball back and forth like the baseball games I saw in the archives?”

“Sorta, I guess, I’m not sure what you saw in the archives. I just need practice throwing the ball. I’m still learning,” Aria answered. “And I want to break in my new glove. Aunt Myleena bought it for me,” she said, holding up her glove.

“It’s a nice one,” Jason said approvingly.

“It’s an authentic Terran glove,” Aria said proudly.

“My glove is in the utility room, you can use it,” Jason told the bionoid.

“Alright. Let’s go, Aria, while we have time.”

They spent the time up until dinner talking about nothing important whatsoever, which to Jason was the best kind of conversation to have, and then they moved out onto the deck, which was the only place big enough to hold that many people for dinner. Ayama, Surin, and Seido set out a huge spread that was a mix of traditional New Year dishes and complementary fare from several species. So, Jason was looking at a main course of *baya*, which was a sheep-like animal from Draconis and the traditional main course for a New Year dinner, but also a Terran turkey and a Shio *makiru*, which was a fish dish, which were main dishes of similarly important holidays in their respective cultures. Jason watched as much as he ate as the biogenic lifeforms had their first real taste of eating, and all of them looked quite serious as they sampled every dish on the table. Cybi was sitting

directly across from him at the large table, so he watched her mostly, watching her enjoy both the flavors and the sensation of eating.

“Alright, I’m starting to understand the Shio obsession with eating,” Cyvanne declared as she tried a Shio black bread roll.

“We don’t obsess over eating, Cyvanne, we celebrate the flavors of food, which to us is a celebration of life itself,” Seido told her easily. “Meal time in Shio culture is nearly a sacred tradition of good food, good wine, and enjoying the company of friends and family, so we like everything to be as good as possible so we enjoy it as much as possible. That’s why chefs are held in such high regard in our society, because they’re seen as bringers of joy, family, and togetherness. And that’s why even our fast food restaurants are fifty times better than the high class Faey restaurants,” she said, giving Ayama a sly sidelong look.

“No holy wars at the dinner table, especially at New Year’s,” Jyslin warned, which made Ayama laugh.

“The Shio aren’t the only ones that put such an emphasis on the importance of a meal. The Kirri and the Ogravians have similar outlooks, just more formal,” Cybi mused, then she nibbled at a Terran strawberry, and her bionoid’s eyes just seemed to light up. “This is good!”

“And you prove you’re as much a Faey as Jyslin,” Jason laughed. “What is it with Faey and strawberries?”

“They’re almost as good as *oye*,” Symone said eagerly, spooning some sliced strawberries and *oye* in juice onto her plate.

“Trelle must have punished us for some past transgression for not making strawberries native to Draconis,” Jyslin laughed.

“So, what do you think, Cylan?” Jason asked. “You’ve been awful quiet.”

“I’ve been too busy trying this,” he answered. “And I like it. Tasting things is much more of an intense sensory experience than I expected. I like the turkey most of all.”

“Are you sure your bionoid is based on a Faey, Cylan?” Symone accused.

“He must have a faulty sensor mesh,” Ayama said.

“Hush,” Jason retorted. “I see nothing wrong at all with him liking turkey more than *baya*.”

“It must be a male thing,” Cyra noted.

“No way, I hate turkey,” Tim retorted. “We always had ham for our holiday dinners, and *baya* tastes almost like ham.”

“We’ll let Aria decide which is better,” Jason declared, looking at his adopted daughter.

“I don’t like either,” she declared. “I like the mak—mik—*makuru*.”

“*Makuri*, dear,” Seido smiled at her. “And that means Shio fare is superior, so I win,” she added smugly.

“You only won one, there’s an entire table here against you,” Ayama replied lightly.

“Amber seems to prefer the *makuri* too,” Seido noted, pointing to the little vulpar, sitting on the table beside Rann.

Amber gave an enthusiastic little yip.

“Well, that basically settles things,” Jason said with a chuckle. “God forbid we dare go against Amber.”

Amber gave him an arrogant look and flicked her tails upwards insultingly.

Unfortunately, work waited for no Grand Duke, so after dinner, while the family was enjoying their presents, Jason absconded to his office and caught up on things. The refit process was right on schedule, and several very important ships had already completed the process. The *Arabax* and five different fleet battleships had come off the refit docks, and their IP had been tested and passed...literally tested by having things shot at them. Three battleships had also finished refit, as well as one carrier and a slew of various classes of cruisers and destroyers, and that was enough to form a full task force. Myri had already done that, putting all the refitted ships on standby and sending them out on a quick shakedown cruise...sending them out to Prakka to deliver some supplies, but also to ensure that the unique environmental conditions of Prakka weren’t going to monkey with the IP

system. They had to use the Stargate at Terra to do it, since there were Confederate assets in the system, and they couldn't see the task force jump in. They might start asking questions, and Jason wanted no questions involving his translight drives.

Jason also scheduled Enva's little trip out to Prakka, which had turned into something of a major tour for the rulers. Enva naturally spread around the fact she was going to Prakka to look at the progress, so now 24 different rulers were going to go take a look at things...which generally meant that they were going to nose around and irritate the construction teams while getting in the way as much as possible. The others were going to be in bionoids, though, while Enva and Jason were going to be there in person. They had to be, the tabis would be afraid of them if they were in bionoids.

He could think of worse things to do than spend time with Enva. He did sincerely like her.

He read through one of the status reports that Myleena felt comfortable sending over the network, which basically just confirmed that Project F was now officially disbanded. Myleena was now working on Project H, the nexus bridge project, and she had about half her Project F team with her, the spatial and hyperspace experts, like Emia. The rest had gone back to their original divisions or moved on to other research projects, or in the case of the Kimdori, they went back home.

Project G had also done some work over the last few takirs. They'd gotten Confederate standard Adamantium armor up to 2,540%, and they were still working on it. RDX was convinced they could get that up to 8,000%, similar to Neutronium numbers, but still, a 2,500% increase in armor integrity was going to be *huge* when they went after the Syndicate at the Dreamer homeworld. RDX's projections based on known Syndicate weaponry meant that, when used in tandem with a diffuser, Confederate ships would be able to resist all but the most powerful Syndicate weaponry. They'd only be vulnerable to their high-yield antimatter missiles and warheads and the heavy mount plasma cannons on the super-ships. Their smaller ship classes would pose virtually no threat to a Confederate ship once it used up its missiles, at least so long as it was one ship against one ship. He'd have to have Myri and Navii drill it into Lorna's head that the IP system was like shields in that it could be brought down by concentrated

fire, so ship captains had to be careful not to put themselves in a Rambo situation, taking on entire enemy squadrons by themselves.

The only ship captain allowed to go Rambo in the KMS was Sevi. She had this almost annoying knack for surviving them almost unscathed.

It was looking favorable, at least for the KMS. Juma projected that they'd have every line vessel refitted with both a drive and IP in 47 days. Given they were projecting that the Dreamer operation was going to start in about 60 days, giving everyone time to refit their ships and train for the operation, it meant that his ships would be ready.

He checked the other pieces of that puzzle. The IP refits of the armor for forward bases, modular armor sections that were assembled into initial forward command posts in invasions, was on schedule, and all of them would be ready. Those forward bases would be their foothold on the Dreamer homeworld, giving the infantry an armored position from which to sally forth to take the planet and serving as a command post for the generals on site and overseeing the invasion. They would also have the IP refits done on their heavy fixed guns, artillery pieces that would allow them to fire on enemy positions from dozens of kathra away. However, *fixed gun* was a bit of a misnomer when it came to those units, because they had grav engines in them and could be deployed to a new position fairly quickly. They were guns built on a mobile platform that anchored to the ground to fire, given that they had too much recoil to fire when using their grav engines.

It was almost curious to him that in this super-advanced modern age, the ground forces used much of the same types of weaponry and battle tactics that his own people used in the 20th century. Fixed positions, mechanized armor, artillery, infantry armed with both handheld weaponry and explosives (mainly missile packs instead of grenades), air support and aerial supremacy, Sioa's Army used them all...they just also had access to things like hard shield generators. And like the old American Army, Sioa had an entire division based on aerial units. The U.S. Army had helicopters, but the Karinne Army had exomechs, Wolf fighters, and fast attack craft, corvettes and gunboats, all with the mission to support ground forces, strike at enemy ground targets, and establish air superiority over the battlefield. In the KMS, the Army was both an army and an air force, since the term *Army* in the KMS dealt with planetside operations within the atmosphere. Much as

Juma commanded both the Navy and the Marines, Sioa had command of all forces meant to operate on or near the ground, in support of the primary mission of attaining military control over ground territory. So Sioa commanded both the Army and the Army Air Support Command, kind of like the old American Army Air Corps of World War II.

That was where he would be. He would be on the ground in a Titan, fighting to liberate the Dreamers from the Syndicate *personally*, and not sitting behind a desk waiting and worrying. And given that they were still critically short of Titan riggers, he felt he would be contributing to the effort in a meaningful way. One more Titan in the battle plan would *matter* on that moon, given how powerful and formidable they were.

He turned and looked out the window, where his brown skinned, pink haired adopted daughter was zooming back and forth close to the water on her new hoverbike behind Rann, Shya, and Sora, and it reminded him exactly what he was going there to do, and why it mattered so much. The Dreamers were Faey, they were his cousins as much as the Kimdori were, and they were under the heel of a merciless, cruel government that tortured *children* almost to the point of madness and then murdered them the instant they became dangerous. They were heartless, they were monsters, they were evil, evil incarnate, and he would do everything in his power to rescue his distant relatives from their brutal dominion. He would do it because it was the right thing to do. He would do it because it was the only way they would ever find a way to bring peace between their two galaxies.

He would do it for that little girl, so it never happened to another Dreamer again.

He held no illusions about this. The Syndicate was too big to take on in a conventional war, to defeat and remove from the universe, so there was no hope to end them and the threat they posed permanently. He would have to find a way to live with them, basically keep them over there and too afraid to cross the void. That hurt, it hurt because he knew that he was dooming Lord knew how many poor souls to suffer under their system, but they were just too big to defeat, and he wasn't going to risk plunging two entire galaxies into a war that might last centuries, kill trillions and trillions of people, to try to overthrow them using clandestine tactics.

He couldn't save them all, so the least he could do was save the ones that mattered most to him. He would free the Dreamers and remove them from Andromeda, bring them home to the Milky Way, and then let them live in peace.

He brought up a holo of their future home, and he felt that they would like it. In some ways, the night sky would look like what they saw from their homeworld, and the sun there was the same color as the one that rose over the Dreamer homeworld.

The system was SS2-14, one of the stars in the middle band of the Strands of Trelle, discovered by Kimdori explorers ten days ago. What made it perfect was that it was well away from Oasis, sitting off the home quadrant rather than the Q quadrant, and it was a 17 second jump in mode three from Karis to the system. Jason had decided to name the system Tir Tairngire, "the Promised Land," based on an old Irish myth. That was a name that native speakers of the Dreamer language would have no problems pronouncing, and Jason felt it was a suitable name for what that world would represent for the Dreamers. A new start, a place of safety, a reward for generations of suffering in the yoke of a heartless master. The system itself was quite a find, because it was similar to RJ-44 and Prakka. A gas giant in the goldilocks zone had nine different moons that supported life, giving the Dreamers plenty of room to expand without leaving the system, and the gas giant was the same color as the one in Andromeda, so they wouldn't feel quite so out of place there. It being in the strands was similar to their homeworld being right on the rim of Andromeda in that their nights would either have a starry sky or a black sky, so that too would be similar enough to not feel out of place but still be different enough to remind them that they weren't under the dominion of the Syndicate anymore. The moon they'd selected, Moon C, had the closest environmental conditions to the Dreamer homeworld as well, with just slightly heavier gravity, similar atmospheric composition, and just slightly higher pressure. Its axis tilt was only one degree off from their homeworld, so it would have similar seasons. But it was a little warmer than their current home, which would mean those similar seasons would see milder winters than they were used to, and it had a larger tropical zone and smaller arctic region.

It was the perfect location. It was outside the galaxy, so the rest of the Confederation wasn't going to get there easily, and they'd see them coming

nine days away. The Karinnes had operational control over the system, had interdiction up, and there was a Stargate there as of four days ago which opened to Karis space, giving them the ability to control who went in and out. He fully intended to turn it into a fortress to protect the Dreamers, both from any Syndicate reprisals and from his own allies, who might not have their best interests at heart. He had KES teams there scouting the moon and finding the best places to settle the Dreamers, at least a very general idea of it since he had no idea how that was going to go. Given that they had a very decentralized agrarian society, he wasn't sure how they'd want to live when they moved.

However they wanted to live, that was exactly how they were going to live. The Karinnes would be there to make their new homes as comfortable as possible, but they would have control over their own homes and their own destinies. He owed that to them, they all did, because of what Aria did for them all.

He'd have Tir Tairngire ready for them when the time came. It just came down to freeing them from the Syndicate.

Chapter 3

Kaira, 16 Suraa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 12 January 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Kaira, 16 Suraa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Kosigi Lunar Base, Karis

It. Was. Beautiful.

Dellin and Cynna had busted their respective asses to make sure this happened before the Andromeda operation, for Jason to approach the second fleet flagship, the sister ship to the *Tianne*, in his personal skimmer. It hung in the cold air over the core, docked to the main spar and the only place to which it could dock. As of five hours ago, with them finishing the initial testing and certifying that all systems were operational, construction was officially complete. It was even now being loaded with all the supplies and mobile equipment it needed, and tomorrow it would be officially commissioned. It was operational, but since the crew was still settling in, it wasn't ready for commission, as commission implied the ship was ready for duty.

As usual, a ship of that size and importance being brought in caused a shakeup in the entire Navy, since Juma had 9,000 crew slots to fill and they had to be damn good at what they did to serve on a flagship. The ship's captain would be newly promoted Staff Admiral Haema Karinne, pulled from the *Iyaneri* to command this new ship, and that had caused a tiny bit of a row in HQ. One of the staff admirals, Eloë Karinne (as opposed to a Staff Admiral) was expecting to move back to command, but Juma had opted to go with Haema instead. She wanted to keep Eloë on the command staff, and that was a move with which Navii agreed. Eloë would serve the KMS better as an admiral that planned operations than on the bridge of a

ship, even though she was almost expecting to be pulled from HQ and put back on a ship.

What that did was put the second most experienced command-class captain in the KMS on a fleet flagship, and Jason felt it was a good choice. Haema would be just as effective from the bridge of her ship as Palla was on the *Tianne*, and she'd been on the ship for the last month to prepare for her command, overseeing the last stages of construction and memorizing every tiny detail about the ship there was.

Jason was here before the official commissioning ceremony mainly on a whim. He'd been in Kosigi for a scheduled meeting with Zaa anyway, so when he heard that the ship was officially completed, he decided to come over and take a look at it. The ship was completely done, including having the CBMOM installed and initialized by Siyhaa—and he felt a bit surly not being included on that team—so as soon as the crew was aboard and ready and the commission ceremony was over, the ship would go on its shakedown cruise. And they were asking a *whole lot* from Haema and the crew, because Lorna wanted it in the fleet when they attacked Andromeda. Jason almost said no out of reflex, not about to send a green crew on a mission like *that*, but both Lorna and Navii talked him into it. The crew didn't need months of training to sit in the back and use its GRAF cannon, which was what Lorna intended it to do. The ship would be long-range support and would not participate in the close support and ground invasion phases of the operation.

Navii had a simpler reason, and that was if there were two of them there, the *Tianne* wouldn't be focused upon the way the Syndicate had in the last days of the brief war. Two fleet flagships meant two targets, and the ship's crew could easily get in enough experience in their shakedown to handle sitting in the rear echelon and firing their GRAF cannon at targets tens of thousands of kathra away. And if that wasn't enough, the ship would have orders to actively avoid engagement. If the Syndicate tried to engage the ship, it would retreat, *because* the crew wasn't ready for a nose to nose battle quite yet.

Under those conditions, Jason had grudgingly agreed to put the ship on the board for the operation.

The skimmer landed in the port bow landing bay, and there were only two Faey there to greet him, Haema and her new XO, Admiral Jann Wilson from the battleship *Trelle's Gift*, along with a hovering hologram representing the ship's CBMOM, whom Jyslin had named Cori. The hologram looked almost exactly like Coma and Jyslin, except its color was more pale blue than silver.

It said a lot that Haema had chosen a *man* for her first officer (outside of the obvious jokes about Haema wanting a man as handsome as Jann next-door for conjugal visits), but Jann was one outstanding ship captain and Jason could only see the wisdom in Haema choosing him. Dera opened the hatch as Jason shut down the skimmer, then he climbed out and gave Haema a warm hug. "Hey you," he said. "How you doing?"

"You're early, Jason, the ceremony's tomorrow," she winked, then kissed him on the cheek.

"I'm here to give the kids a tour of the ship without a bunch of cameras following us around," he replied easily, then he took Jann's hand and endured it when Jann also kissed him on the cheek. Faey men saw nothing wrong with that. "You're looking good with that diamond on your uniform, Jann."

"I'm not used to it yet," he chuckled, touching it gingerly.

"Hello, Cori. How are you today?"

"*Good day, Jason. I am operating at peak efficiency,*" she answered. Cori was going to be alright. She'd only been online for about three days, but she'd showed some impressive progress since then, both in learning her role in things and expanding on her personality template. She was less mellow than Coma, but that was because she hadn't really had much time for her personality to evolve quite yet. But she did show the same concern for the welfare of her crew that Coma did, and that was what Jason wanted to see the most.

"I'm sorry I missed the installation. I blame Siyhaa for that, she didn't put me on the installation team," he bristled a bit.

"You were too busy and she knew it," Haema chided.

Jason turned and looked back to the skimmer. *Well, come on, you sillies,* he warned. Aria, Rann, and Shya piled out a moment later, all three of them very excited, and Haema leaned down and gave Rann a hug when he reached them.

You're getting so big, Rann! she sent lightly. *And my goodness, Aria, did you grow another two tikra since the last time I saw you?*

Probably, she replied ruefully. *I just keep growing and growing and growing.* And that was the truth. She'd only been a little taller than Rann when she came home, but now she was more than a head taller than him, looking more and more her age with each passing takir. She was growing nearly .7 tikra a takir thanks to the growth acceleration treatments she was on to get her to her proper height for her age, according to Songa, who had done some scans and predicted that Aria would be a very tall young lady when she finished growing, nearly eye to eye with Jyslin. She was also on pain-reducing agents to take the edge off her growing pains, which were quite sharp given how fast she was growing. Sometimes Jason almost thought he could hear her bones crack as they grew.

And she'd also *officially* entered puberty. Just five days ago, she had her first menstrual cycle, so she'd been introduced to the mysteries of feminine hygiene products by Jyslin. His newly adopted little girl was quickly becoming a little lady.

Well, I think it suits you, dear. You're going to be quite beautiful tall, you have the face and shoulders for it, Haema told her.

Aww, thanks, Aria answered modestly.

"Alright, you ready to get a good look at the ship?" Jason asked aloud.

"This is gonna be fun! We toured the *Tianne*, but it was hard to see anything cool!" Rann said eagerly.

Ryn and Dera followed along as Haema took the kids on a nearly two hour long tour of the ship, showing them all the noteworthy sights, from engineering to a weapon battery to the bridge, the things that would interest kids, but Jason separated himself from the tour when they reached the bridge to walk down the corridor and enter the core chamber. Inside, a spire of pale blue crystal behind a visible hard shield dominated the chamber,

Cori's core, and she manifested a hologram when Jason approached.
"Welcome to my core, Jason," she greeted.

[I see they didn't change the design from Coma's core,] he answered, looking around. [Now that we're out of Haema's earshot, how's it going? You feel you're ready for duty?]

[My systems are operating at peak efficiency,] she answered. [The ship will be ready for the ceremony and shakedown cruise tomorrow.]

[Have they delivered your bionoid?]

[Yes, it is currently in its assigned quarters. My Karis bionoid is still in the laboratory, and quarters are already secured for it in an apartment building in the Trade District. Rook is doing a couple of final adjustments to its biorhythmics.]

[Have you practiced with them?]

[I am doing so as we speak, your Grace, with both of them,] she answered. [I'm having some issues with handling small, delicate objects with my bionoid aboard. I think the sensor mesh might need adjustment.]

[That's not the sensor mesh, you're just not used to the bionoid's physical strength. Remember, your bionoid here is built to different specs than the one on Karis,] he told her. [Do you feel ready for the mission? I didn't particularly want to assign you to a combat mission so soon after you came online. I wanted you to have more time to settle in and get some experience.]

[I will be ready, your Grace,] she answered, looking down at him with a flicker of emotion passing over her hologram. [But I appreciate your concern. The ship is operating at peak efficiency and will be capable of carrying out its mission.]

[I'm glad of that, but I do want you to know that I won't be disappointed no matter how well you do. I fully understand that I'm throwing you guys into the gauntlet with very little time to establish yourselves aboard ship and virtually no time to prepare for the mission.]

[We will complete the mission,] she predicted strongly.

[I'm sure you will, I believe in you,] he told her. [So, what do your bionoids look like? Are they both the same? How much did you alter them from your base appearance?]

[They're both the same, and not by much. I find this appearance... pleasing,] she answered, touching her upper chest with her fingertips. [I did opt for a different hair color, though. I much like the color blue, the same hue as the Karinne crest. It's nearly identical to the color of their skin.]

[A blue-haired clone of my wife, now that'll be interesting to see,] he chuckled mentally. [And I'm glad you like the appearance. I do happen to think that it's the most lovely face in the world, given I'm married to the woman it was based on.]

[Yes, Duchess Jyslin. We met when she was brought up yesterday for merge compatibility tests. She is quite nice,] she confided.

[Hold on a second, Jyslin wasn't supposed to be on that list,] Jason communed strongly. [She's Cyrsi's primary!] And was she. Jyslin's merge with Cyrsi was almost insanely strong, beating out her secondary by nearly 50%. She had nearly as strong a merge as Jason had with Cybi, and the results of those tests led to a little beefing up of Cyrsi's core amplifier stacks. That kind of raw power wasn't going to be ignored, so they were increasing Cyrsi's ability to fight to exploit that advantage.

[Then it's a good thing she isn't the primary or secondary,] Cybi cut in. [Brana is the primary, Jason, and Evinn is the secondary. Jyslin came in sixth in the compatibility tests.]

[She shouldn't have been in them in the first place!]

[Blame her for that, she showed up yesterday afternoon and demanded to be tested.]

[Well that makes no sense.]

[Of course it does. She doesn't want the others to think she gets any special treatment because she's your wife. All the others had to do compatibility tests, so she did it too. You know how tedious they are.]

[Well...I guess that makes sense,] he grumbled mentally. [Wait, Evinn's the secondary? That's a surprise.]

[It was to him too,] Cybi replied lightly.

[Where are you, Pam?] Aria called using her interface.

[I'm in the core chamber, Aria, chatting with Cori,] he answered. *[I've seen the bridge, they didn't change it at all from the Tianne. You guys can come down here when you're done there, you can see the real Cori.]*

[That sounds neat. We'll be there in a little bit.]

"Might wanna turn on your hard shield," he chuckled aloud. "Kids can be overly curious."

Cori gave him an amused look, and she did activate her hard shield system, three layers of hard shields that protected her core. She had to scoot her hologram forward a bit to make room for it. "You had much chance to talk to the kids?"

"Yes, they're quite active on the biogenic network," she answered. "I'm still listening more than talking within the restricted area." That was that part of the biogenic network reserved only for the Generations and the sentient biogenic computers. "The Generations are...chatty."

He had to laugh. "I can't argue with that," he agreed.

The door opened, and all three kids came in with Haema behind them, and all three came right over to the core, gathering at the circular rail that protected someone from walking into the hard shield. "Wow, is that you, Cori?" Aria asked.

"Yes, Aria, that is my core crystal. In effect, the real me," she answered.

"It's smaller than Cybi's," Rann noted.

"There's a difference between a CBIM and a CBMOM, Rann. They have different duties," Jason answered. "So their core crystals are different. But that doesn't in any way mean that Coma and Cori are any less than Cybi and the CBIMs just because their core crystals are smaller."

"Yeah, think of Rook. His crystal is like this," Shya said, holding her fingers apart. "And he's alive too. I really like him, I think he's cool."

"Size doesn't mean much, kids, don't obsess over it," Jason told them.

“I only have one word for you, Jason. Salira,” Haema said with an impish look.

“That’s entirely different,” he said airily. “I do that mainly to make her laugh. I know she gets a kick out of it.”

Haema gave him a look, then smiled knowingly. “Not many galactic rulers would act like a fool just to make someone laugh, Jason. That’s why I believe in you,” she winked. She burst into helpless laughter when he took hold of her and dipped her, as if they were dancing.

“Sooo, you wanna tell me what you’re naming the ship?” Jason asked her, still holding her in the dip.

“And why should I ruin the suspense, Jason?” she winked.

“Because I’ll drop you on the deck if you don’t.”

She had to laugh. “Such a meanie.”

“I don’t have to admit it,” he replied, shaking her a little bit, which made her laugh harder. “So spill or you’re going to sickbay with a concussion.”

She grinned up at him. “Alright, alright, you terrible cheater,” she succumbed as the kids giggled and Cori looked on with an amused smile. “I’m naming him the *Kinai*.”

“Well, that’s a bit of a surprise. I never thought any Faey would name a ship after a *gara uka*.” The *gara uka* were the “demons” in Faey mythology.

“Kinai was the reformed *gara uka*, Jason, who turned to Trelle after seeing the true evil of Kobakk and the other *gara uka*,” she explained. “That’s why she’s called *the Redeemed* in the scriptures.”

“Huh, I don’t remember that part of the story,” Jason mused.

“That’s because it’s in the Book of Trelle, and I believe you don’t read that for religious reasons,” she smiled. “That’s always been my favorite story out of the scriptures, so I decided to honor she who redeemed herself of the evil of the *gara uka* with a ship name.”

“You’re right, I’m not getting into this one,” he chuckled.

They finished up the tour and got back on the skimmer, and Jason lifted off to get back to business. He had Rann and Shya along with him for work today and decided to show Aria a little bit of what his job was like by bringing her too. She'd spent the day with him, and she was surprised at how boring his job really was, spending hours and hours just staring at a hologram screen reading reports.

If she only knew.

He had one more very important meeting today, a council session, and he'd missed an equally important meeting due to detouring to take a look at the new flagship. Unfortunately, the kids couldn't attend the council meeting given the confidential nature of what they'd be discussing, so he dropped them off at home and flew on to the White House. He landed on the pad into the building, and when he reached the office, he just had to glance at his newest employee...a tabi. She was laying in a little bed on a table behind Brall's desk, just to the right of the door to Jason's office, sleeping contentedly. Aya wasn't satisfied with just having a tabi in the house, so she'd had one brought in to live in the office to serve as an additional layer of protection if an assassin tried to get at him while he was at the White House. The office staff took care of it, and everyone seemed to like it, even Chirk. And Kizzik weren't exactly known for their affinity for pets. Dera had named the juvenile female Chichi, not quite an adult but no longer a kitten, and it was adorable in the pattern tabi way. This one had raven black fur, which made its solid lavender eyes a bit striking. The tabi seemed content with living in the White House, since it could go outside if it wanted, and it got all kinds of attention from everyone who came in and out of the office. Virtually nobody could come into the office and resist petting the tabi, since her bed was so conveniently close to Jason's door. The only issues she had were with bionoids, but Jason had explained the concept of them to her, so she didn't react to them in a way that would put the guards on alert when one came into the office. She didn't react to them at all now, but she also didn't entirely like it when bionoids tried to pet her, at least ones she couldn't identify by sight or the sound of their voices.

"Anything new in the inbox since I left, Chirk?" he asked as he came in.

"No, revered Hive-leader."

“That’s the best news I heard all day. Track down Mrar and send her up to the office.”

Chichi followed him into the office, and he ended up with her on his lap as he worked through the last of his paperwork, which he rather liked. He was so used to Amber keeping him company at home when Rann was busy, he liked having someone around that liked ear scratches. And what was even better, Amber liked Chichi, so there was no friction when Rann brought her to the office. But Jason wasn’t allowed to take her home, because she *was* here for a reason. She may be adorable and may be more of a pet than not to Jason, but she was a *service animal*, and she had a job to do protecting the White House by detecting a hostile invader. She couldn’t do that job if Jason took her home at night. However, she had quite a few dedicated caretakers to make sure she stayed well fed and happy during the night, since she spent that time down in the KMS command center. And it was almost annoying to Jason that She seemed to be her favorite person down there.

Aya already had a plan to introduce more tabis to the White House to pair with the Marine Guard that protected it. And Cybi was considering getting a tabi for her facility, though it would take a bit of training to get the tabi to accept living with a bionoid. She thought that it would be a good learning experience to have a pet, and it came with the added bonus of having a pet that could warn her if someone broke into her facility.

He could almost swear that tabis were taking over the planet.

It was a good thing their new adorable overlords only cared about being fed and getting petted in return for their benevolent rule.

The door opened, and one of the newest members of the House of Karinne padded in...though he had trouble seeing her over the desk. Tiny little Mrar Rahl jumped up onto the chair and stood on it so she was more visible. She was Pai, and she was his new telekinesis instructor. He’d been working with her for 16 days now, and it had been quite an eye-opening experience, because she was almost *frighteningly* skilled with telekinesis, and she had nearly 40 years of experience teaching telekinesis to her students the same way a professor might teach mathematics. She could do things Jason didn’t think was possible, capable of telekinetically manipulating *atoms*, and on the other side of the bridge, she could lift

nearly 235 konn with her power. 235 konn...that was around 600 pounds or 250 kilograms. That was *insane* strength given it was in no way boosted or augmented by a gestalt, and it made her the most powerful unboosted telekinetic on the planet by a wide margin. She had agreed to come to Karis to train the Generations to expand and refine their abilities. And Jason liked her. She was kind, gentle, earnest, and sweet, and she was a *damn* good teacher. “Good afternoon, your Grace. You missed your lesson,” she chided in her high-pitched, squeaky voice, speaking Pai.

“My meeting with the Denmother ran long, I’m sorry,” he lied, speaking Pai for her benefit. Pai had issues with telepathic language insertion, so she was learning Faey the hard way. Because of that, everyone in the White House had inserted Pai and used it to talk to her while she learned Faey. “But I’m here now, and I have a couple of hours before my next appointment. How did the session with Samin go?”

“Very well,” she replied. “He has a lot of natural talent. He has the potential to be a Master.” That was what Pai like her were called on their homeworld, Masters. Those who had mastered telekinesis to the point where they could do things with it that made people gape in astonishment. Mrar was one of their more accomplished Masters, and it was quite a coup to get her to leave Paian and come to Karis to teach them telekinesis.

She wasn’t the only one to leave Paian. Sixty Masters were settling in at the Academy and preparing a syllabus for their first semester formally teaching telekinetic skills as professors. They wouldn’t have all that many students in their classes, but given that Jason had never seen any race as skilled with TK as the Pai, there was no doubt that their students were going to learn a hell of a lot. Jason himself had learned a hell of a lot in just the 16 days since he started taking lessons from Mrar.

They had a lot in common with the Pai. The Pai and the Generations were the only two known species (even if the Generations were a genetically engineered sub-species and not a true species) that were all telekinetic.

She wasn’t the only new house member from her home system. There were several hundred Pai and Muri in the house now, and many more would be coming in as they cleared Miaari’s screening. It wasn’t all that much of a surprise. The Pai and Muri saw joining the House as the chance to go much

faster than their respective homeworlds, joining a civilization that was already highly technologically advanced, was already exploring the entire galaxy. They got to get out here *now* instead of waiting for their peoples to learn at the Academy and build themselves up to join the other spacefaring races. Miaari had several thousand Pai and Muri in the screening process, and with luck, they'd be finishing and getting into the training programs quickly.

And both the Pai and the Muri were taking advantage of the Academy, since Jason had allowed them to send students there. They had both maxed out their student quotas for the next semester and joined classes mid-semester so they didn't have to wait for the next one, which wasn't that much of an issue since the semester started just 12 days ago. They had students in virtually every major program offered, from technical subjects to artistic ones, learning everything they could. On their home planets, maybe *millions* of Pai and Muri were enrolling in the classes Ayuma was setting up on satellite campuses on all three of their inhabited planets, where they'd be taking both self-study and official classes by remote. Both the Ruling Council and King Mrrsha were building satellite campuses almost faster than Ayuma could get the necessary computers and holographic emitters installed.

They both had a plan, and it was a good one. They were sending their very best to the Academy to learn Confederate standard technology in person, and on their homeworlds, they were sending as many as they could to the satellite campuses, to catch up to Confederation standard education as quickly as possible. And once they had enough education and training, they were going to start integrating Confederate standard technology into their infrastructure to become true spacefaring races, capable of sending ships outside their star system. In the interim, however, they were buying Confederate technology from several civilizations in the Confederation, laying the foundation for the expensive and expansive build-up that would be coming in a couple of years.

The Pai were important, but it was the Muri that just about everyone wanted in the house and trained quickly, due to their amazing ability to find things. Quite a few were already slated to enter the KES and KMS as navigators, and several organizations on Karis were all but drooling over the idea of bringing Muri in, from law enforcement to Miaari herself.

“And how are your lessons going?” he asked.

“We made a little progress today. Hearing communion is nowhere near the same as trying to send using it, so we’ve been exploring different techniques for me to try to emulate it,” she smiled. Mrar was here to learn as much as teach, given that not only was she a Master, but she was also one of the Pai’s strongest telepaths. What she was going to try to learn how to do was actively commune. No Pai they’d tested could do it, but it only stood to reason that if she could hear communion, she might be able to commune herself. So, while she taught the Generations her telekinetic skills, they were going to try to teach her how to commune. Samin and Cybi were handling that, since he was such a good teacher and Cybi had the most experience with communal skills.

Jason found it a little curious that despite being such a strong telepath, Mrar rarely sent, she spoke the majority of the time. In that respect, she was a lot like Yana.

“Now, since we’re running late, let’s get down to business,” Mrar said imperiously, vaulting from the chair to the top of his desk and sitting down. “Put your toys away and let’s discuss how you deal with uncertainty when you’re focusing your power at a molecular level.”

Jason spent nearly two hours before the council meeting in a highly interesting and enlightening training session with Mrar, learning the basics of molecular-level telekinesis from her, learning from a species that had been manipulating molecules and even individual atoms for hundreds of years. Samin had taught Jason some of what she knew, but it turned out that a lot of his conclusions and approaches were wrong, and Mrar was correcting those bad habits. In just two hours, Jason learned an absolute *ton* about molecular-level TK, mainly dealing with the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle when it came to using TK (you had to know exactly where something was to affect it if you couldn’t see it, yet the Uncertainty Principle messed with that because defining the atom’s location jacked with its motion and made it much harder to affect). Mrar taught him a technique to affect a *volume* of molecules rather than trying to affect the molecules themselves, somewhat similar to the TK approach to liquids, affecting the space the liquid occupied rather than the liquid itself. Using that technique,

it avoided the Uncertainty Principle by not trying to define the location of a molecule to affect it.

But she did teach him something new, and that was how to *exploit* the Uncertainty Principle to invest tremendous heat into an object. The Pai had come up with a trick similar to the Coalition's Quantum Blasters, using the Uncertainty Principle to create a specific effect. Quantum Blasters caused plasma charges to fire at extreme speeds, but Mrar's trick caused molecules in an area of effect to be invested with sudden energy, which in molecules contained by molecular bonds, meant heat. By the end of the session, Jason was quite proud of himself for causing a glass of water to boil by investing heat into it through an attempt to define the location of the molecules of the water, which caused the molecules to increase their velocity and thereby generate heat.

Which was something he could do already, but Mrar's technique was both much easier and much less taxing.

There was a word for what he just did based on known Karinne science: *pyrokinesis*. But the Pai didn't compartmentalize telekinetic abilities. They believed that any TK with sufficient power and training could do just about anything related to telekinesis.

They finished up just as the council meeting was scheduled to start, and Jason leaned back in his chair and accepted Chichi on his lap, then merged up into the network and cast his consciousness hundreds of light years away, joining to his moleculartronic bionoid on Terra. But he was still aware of his own body, gently petting Chichi as he practiced maintaining awareness and control over his own body as he controlled an external asset.

He *would* master this trick. He *would* get to where he could get up and walk across the room while he was merged to a bionoid.

This was an important meeting because this one was the one where members would formally devote assets for the upcoming operation in Andromeda. Quite a few of them had gone to Prakka to look over the construction of their forward base there—and sightsee a little bit, the system *was* very interesting—and that gave Jason and Dahnai a chance to cajole more members into devoting assets to the battle. And to their credit, the others were invested in the idea. 71 of the 159 members of the

Confederation had devoted assets to the operation, now that they'd heard the overall plan and knew the specific goals and objectives of the operation. And some of them were big empires, like the Verutans, the Subrians, and the Skaa Empire, so Lorna was entirely confident they'd have the assets to complete the mission.

Jason understood why many were reluctant. They were afraid it was the opening salvo in an all-out war on the Syndicate that would cause the Syndicate to send over their entire millions-large fleet to their galaxy, but Jason and quite a few others had to talk them out of that idea. They all understood that getting into that kind of a war with the Syndicate would be a lose-lose scenario. They just had to convince the Syndicate that engaging in that kind of war would be just as lose-lose for *them* to avoid it.

He was one of the last to join, so they got started almost immediately. He sat between Zaa and Brayrak and listened in without paying too much attention as the Council went through some old business first, then Shakizarr, the current head of the Council, brought the important business to the floor. He held a simple vote on who would devote assets to the operation, and Jason paid close attention to the yes votes. He was pleasantly surprised to see that 75 out of the 159 members had voted to devote assets, four more than he was expecting, with the Dakk, Koui, Hrathrari, and Velarians changing their minds. They then talked about preparedness, just not getting into too much detail because they were on Terra rather than Karis, mainly status reports on everyone upgrading to IP.

And Jason was quite proud to hear them crowing about the system. "My admirals speculate that the IP system will reduce ship losses and casualties on our line vessels by nearly 70%," Assaba stated in his strong voice. "And we've currently refitted all ships that are scheduled to participate in the Andromeda operation and fully tested them. Jason, my engineers are quite impressed," he said, looking over at him.

"That's what we built it for, Assaba, to save lives and protect ships," Jason said modestly. "With luck, my research team will increase the IP strength even more before the operation begins, to make our ships even tougher and protect our people even more. I've put even more people on it. The research facility where they're operating is almost a madhouse of activity right now."

“Lorna assures me that we’re going to have sufficient ships for the battle plan but forgive me if I don’t go over it here,” Dahnai spoke up. “She made sure to ask me to stress to everyone going to not ignore upgrading your fighters and army units and armor to IP. My engineers devised a means to install IP on personal combat armor,” she said proudly. “That will give my soldiers even more protection and give them more time to take out the Benga with talent.”

Now that impressed Jason and said a lot about Dahnai’s engineers. Installing IP on something that small was not easy, not easy at all, but her people had figured it out. Of course, the Karinnes already had Crusader IP armor in production—Crusader armor couldn’t be easily or cheaply refitted, it was more practical and economical to replace it—and Trenirk projected that they’d have enough units produced to protect every member of the house that was going to be PIM during the operation. After that, the KMS would undergo the very expensive process of replacing every single set of Crusader armor on the planet with the new IP version, a bill that was going to make Kumi try to kick him in the balls when she saw the final figure. IP on Crusader armor wasn’t nearly as powerful as it was on larger units but given that the weapons they’d face would be much less powerful, that evened out fairly well in the grand design of things. IP in a Crusader system increased its integrity by 3,500%, and that was absolutely nothing to sneeze at. Karinne Crusader armor used compressed Neutronium to begin with, so a 3,500% increase to that turned it to something almost godly, from an infantry point of view. A paper-thin piece of compressed Neutronium energized by IP could withstand a direct hit from a rail slug, and the armor on a Crusader was much thicker than that. It would make his girls virtually immune to most explosive shockwaves and incendiary attacks, but that still wouldn’t be enough to protect them from those fucking antimatter warheads. Jason just thanked God that the Syndicate didn’t seem to use them on all their missiles. They must either be very hard to produce or very expensive.

The mind-blowing bill for replacing every single set of armor on the planet was worth every credit in his eyes so long as it saved just one of his girls.

“Lorna said that she’ll be ready to present the overall battle plan to the council in six days,” Dahnai continued. “We’ll be holding that meeting on

Karis, due to the nature of the information.”

“Your Grand Imperial Majesty, since we’ll be starting the meeting on your last day, I move that we extend your tenure so you chair the summit in its entirety,” Magran offered. “We don’t need a change of chair in the middle of such a sensitive set of meetings.”

“I concur,” Grayhawk nodded. “I second the motion.”

“The motion is on the floor,” Shakizarr said.

“I think we can pass that measure on general acclimation, your Grand Imperial Majesty,” Dahnai said graciously.

“Does anyone object to general acclimation?” Shakizarr called. After a moment, he banged the gavel. “The motion passes. And I appreciate your confidence in me to chair a summit of such import, my friends,” he added with a slight smile.

“We need a strong man like you to keep Jason in line when we’re on his home planet, Shakizarr,” Kreel said lightly, which caused a little chuckling through the chamber. He was leaning back in his chair and had his feet up on his desk. “You know how he is.”

“I do indeed,” the Verutan said with a fleeting look in Jason’s direction.

“My planet, my rules,” Jason retorted, which made Shakizarr smile.

That bit of business concluded, Jason broke his merge at the end of the meeting, feeling a bit hopeful. Given the size of the fleet going in to free the Dreamers, they should have enough to take on any Syndicate forces that don’t flee when they put their plan into motion. Plus, there was going to be a significant ground presence whether they fled or not, unable to get to a transport in time, so this fight was going to take place primarily on the ground rather than in space, at least if they did things right.

And that was where he would be.

He stroked Chichi’s black fur as he considered the upcoming summit. There were three days of meetings planned, with the first day devoted to the battle plan and the operation, before, during, and immediately afterward. The second day was set aside to discuss what happened after the operation, about the possible ways the Syndicate would respond to the attack, and the

third was about their long-term interests in Andromeda in general, mainly dealing with both the Syndicate and the Consortium, their war, and the long-range impact and ramifications of them liberating the Dreamers might bring about. And in his opinion, that was a very good discussion to have. The council needed to think about the future past just this operation, think of their long-term goals concerning Andromeda and the potential for warfare with both the Syndicate and the Consortium.

They needed a plan, and by the end of the summit, they should have one. Much as he may complain about the council and rag on the rulers, he could admit that when they rolled up their sleeves, things got done, and they got done *right*. There were dozens of exceptional people on the council, and not just because they were rulers. Magran was a genius, Shakizarr impressed Jason more and more every day, Enva was so cunning that even the Kimdori were impressed by her, Kreel was the single most underestimated ruler on the council, and Holikk was vastly intelligent and one of the savviest politicians Jason had ever seen. But it was a bit unfair to single rulers out. Every ruler on the council brought something, from Grayhawk to Master Mo, from Magran to Sk'Vrae, from Holikk to Mufar, from Kreel to Assaba, and their diversity created a singular entity that had everything. Intelligence, strength, wisdom, restraint, compassion, cunning, if the council was a single person rather than 159, he or she would be the most formidable person alive in the entire universe.

Well, soon to be 161. Zaa's people had found out that both the Pai and the Muri were seriously considering applying for official membership, both for the advantages of being allied to such high-tech people and for the chance to grow and expand both their technology and their influence. And Jason was rather hoping that both of them would do just that. They needed the protection being the Confederation could provide, and they brought a whole lot to add to the Confederation to make it even better, even if they were tiny one-planet civilizations with ancient technology.

Jason had already readied their desks in the Hall of Peace and put Rook on the task for designing bionoids for Mrrsha and all seven members of the Ruling Council, which would require Jason to install some kind of carousel system so whoever was attending council meetings could get their bionoid in place.

And with that, his workday was done. He checked the time, then sent a comm request. Seconds later, Kreel's face popped up on hologram facing his desk. "What's up, Jayce?"

"Jyslin's gonna be busy tonight. Wanna come over and go do something?"

"Only if it involves getting drunk," he grinned.

"You can all you want," he replied with a chuckle. "I was looking into actually doing more than hanging out in a pub, Kreel. I have to enjoy this time off Aya's apron strings as much as I can," he grinned in reply.

Kreel laughed. "Didn't the Bombers start their new season? I've always been curious about Terran baseball."

"They play tonight, but it's an away game. You mind going over to Hirsa?" he asked.

"Not a bit."

"It's gonna be a bit cool, it's winter up in the northern hemisphere right now."

"No problem, that's what this fur is for. When's it start?"

He checked the local time in Hirsa. "Two hours," he realized. It was scheduled to start at 1730, which was two hours past noon. And since Hirga was on the other side of the planet, it was late morning over there right now when it was late evening on Karga.

"Sounds good to me, I can get there in two hours no problem."

"I'll have them send navs so you can go straight to the Hirsa Stadium, and arrange parking space on a landing pad," Jason said. "And I'd better not tell the kids until after I get home to avoid needing a bus to get over there."

Kreel laughed. "Even you need some *me* time, Jayce," he grinned. "We'll call it an official state visit that happens to involve Makati ale, nachos, peanuts, and veggie dogs at a baseball game."

"My kind of diplomacy," Jason chuckled.

"Then I'm on my way over," Kreel said, standing up from his desk.

"I'll get you cleared through the Stargate. See you at the stadium."

Brista, 22 Suraa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 18 January 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Brista, 22 Suraa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Joint Base Epsilon, Kirga, Karis

It had been a while since he'd PIM'd in a Titan.

It was no different performance wise, but where it was a bit different was that instead of opening his eyes and seeing the opposite wall of the merge pod, he opened his eyes to the tunnel-like open doors leading outside of the Titan. Like most merge-driven units, the cockpit was barely more than a coffin, completely enclosing the pilot in a casing of impact gel inside an armored box to prevent him or her from moving. And in fact, the pilot *couldn't* move when the armored box was closed, he or she was completely immobilized by the inertial impact gel which acted as an emergency backup to the inertial dampers, in case they went offline. The cockpit had no controls, no heads-up displays, no nothing. The secondary cockpit in the head did have displays but no controls and was much more open to allow the passengers some freedom of movement, designed for a wizzo and two mission specialists that would be performing other tasks like mindstriking or operating additional drones or other ECDs, but the primary cockpit in the upper chest of the mecha, between where the collarbones would be on a human or Faey, didn't. It was designed to give the pilot maximum protection both from weapons fire and from inertia.

And that protection was even more fearsome now. The armored box holding the pilot had its own IP system in it on a dedicated power plant, with a hard shield between the interior doors into the cockpit box and the external doors. An attack had to penetrate the shields, the carapace, and the secondary armor around the cockpit to kill a pilot. And given the size of a Titan compared to the pilot, hitting the pilot would be either a matter of exceptional marksmanship or exceptional luck.

Jason's visor darkened to protect his eyes from the bright Karis sun as he stepped out onto the extended platform at the base of the doors, which would retract when the cockpit doors closed, and looked out over the assembled rulers of the Confederation. About a quarter of them were bionoids, mainly those who couldn't survive on Karis, and the rest were here in person, brought to Karis using the Nexus Bridge so their trip was very fast, and in a way, very exciting for them since they got to see the Nexus Bridge in action from a personal perspective. And all of them had just watched Jason and the Storm Riders along with the 253rd Marine Exomech Company, the War Saints, as they conducted a demonstration of sorts, a mock battle in the Desert Terrain Combat Simulation range, which doubled as a chance for the riggers to shake down their newly refitted Titans to make sure everything was working properly in more extreme conditions than a test in a maintenance bay.

It was the first time most of them had seen Jason pilot a rig in person or seen Titans in action from so close. They'd seen holos of him out in the field during the brief war with the Syndicate, but now they got to see him doing his chosen profession within the KMS from a much closer perspective.

This hadn't really been planned. He'd told the council he had to do this before the summit began, and they decided they wanted to see it, see the Titans up close. Just about everyone in the Confederation was extremely impressed by the Titans, to the point where nearly half the Confederation was trying to develop their own giant mecha...which wasn't easy. Of the assorted empires, Jason figured only about five had the technological skill to build a 42 shakra tall exomech and make it fast enough to be useful in real combat. The sheer weight of a Titan and their massive power requirements made them much harder to build than just upscaling an existing design. The Karinnes themselves had had to develop new technology to make the Titans viable...but *God* were they viable. They were, by far, the most powerful exomech in the CCM.

Jason rose up using his armor's grav pods to the head cockpit, where a nearly giddy Princess Sirri Merrane was rising up from the hatch in the top of the mecha's head construct. Jason had promised her a ride in a Titan, and he was happy to keep that promise. The passenger cockpit had three seats in it, and the other two seats had been occupied by Dahnai and Shakizarr.

The Verutans were one of the five Jason felt had the technological skill to build their own giant mecha, and from what Miaari told him, they'd made a lot of progress. They may have an operational prototype in about a year.

"So, you like it, Sirri?" Jason asked as he took off his helmet and locked it behind his neck, and Dahnai rose up from the hatch behind her daughter.

"I want one!" she nearly screamed, trying very hard not to jump up and down in excitement. "Give me one, Uncle Jason!"

"Greedy, greedy, greedy," he teased as he took Dahnai's hand and helped her land, then Shakizarr floated up and out in his brand-new Crusader armor...just without biogenics in it. Jason had gifted a suit of moleculartronic-based armor to every ruler in the Confederation.

"Now that was quite an experience," Shakizarr said with bright eyes and even a bit of a smile. "I'm quite surprised that I never felt jostled."

"We have some pretty serious inertial dampening in the cockpits," Jason explained. "Did you enjoy the ride?"

"Very much so, Jason. And it was quite interesting to hear the STG chatter in real time and see things from the pilot's perspective to understand what it all means. That's not easy to do when you're viewing telemetry feeds."

"It takes a lot of communication between the rigs to be effective," Jason nodded.

"I certainly see why you do this," Shakizarr added, looking over as Tara dismounted her rig, stepping out onto the platform and then using the pods in her armor to get down to the ground, landing beside two members of her ground crew as they opened an access door in the foot and jacked datalines into a port.

"I don't do it *only* because it's fun, in a way," Jason answered. "I do it because I can't stand the idea of just sitting in my office and letting my girls do the fighting for me. Besides, I'm a decent enough rigger for a company commander to take me in as a reservist, and we're so short on Titan riggers right now that they need me. Right now, even one more Titan rigger matters."

“I can understand why you have so few. Piloting this mecha must be very difficult.”

“It takes a lot of training,” he chuckled with a nod. “And the course has a nearly 80% fail rate for first-timers. It takes the average Titan rigger three tries to pass the training course and get rated.”

“Wow,” Dahnai murmured.

“Yeah, wow,” Jason agreed. “So, you’ve got a lot of practice to get in on the other rigs before you’re ready for a Titan, Sirri. And don’t be depressed if you don’t pass the first time. Very few riggers do.”

“Did you pass the first try, Jason?” Shakizarr asked.

“Yeah, but I had an advantage in that I did some test driving when the Titans were still in prototype stage,” he admitted. “So I had experience before I did the actual rating course. I’ll admit that if I hadn’t have had that experience, most likely I would have failed my first attempt.”

He escorted his passengers back to the others, then joined them as the other riggers dismounted and started doing post-op checks, making sure the IP systems didn’t cause any hidden damage to the rig systems. He endured a whole bunch of questions from quite a few of the rulers, trying to politely disengage himself so he could get down to the important part of his time before the briefing...Zaa. She’d told him that she had some information in from the Dreamer homeworld, reported by her infiltrators, and he’d very nearly cut the exercise short so she could brief him.

Eventually, though, he got free of the council and got Zaa more or less alone on a dropship heading back to Karsa. Dahnai, sensing what Jason was up to, managed to get herself on the dropship with them, as did Sk’Vrae, Kreel, and Krirara. Zaa didn’t see them as a barrier to starting to divulge her information, so as soon as the hatch was closed and the dropship was off the ground, she began. “Jason, they know we are coming,” she declared.

“Who does? The Syndicate?”

She shook her head. “The Dreamers. My children have thoroughly investigated the moon over the last two takirs, and they have discovered that there is *far* more going on there than any of us suspected. What they

show the Syndicate, what we see, it's all a front. They pretend to be what the Syndicate sees of them to protect their culture."

"Well, that sounds interesting," Dahnai said. "And what's the truth, Denmother?"

"There are far more Oracles than we expected," she answered. "The village elder in every village on the planet, the village chieftain, is an Oracle. They conceal the true number of Oracles from the Benga, and in a way, they sacrifice a small fraction of their number to the Syndicate to protect the others. But if you think about it, there's little else they can do," she said in defense of them. "But what matters here, Jason, my friends, is that they *know*. They know we are coming. They know what we intend to do. And they are keeping it secret."

"Just like Aria," Jason breathed.

"That's welcome news," Sk'Vrae said in relief.

"It goes beyond that," Zaa continued. "Jason, they've known about our coming for hundreds of years," she said, looking at him. "My children found references to *Tir Tairngire* in their historical archives, many of which are ancient prophecies."

"What is that?" Krirara asked.

"It's a place, where I'm taking the Dreamers when we liberate them," Jason answered her. "I named it Tir Tairngire, it's a mythical realm Celtic folklore. The name means *promised land* in Celtic."

"They know its name," Zaa continued. "And they know that it will be their sanctuary. The only thing they didn't know is exactly *when* we would come to free them. For centuries, they've been quietly biding their time, doing the best they could to hide their truth and waiting for us to come and save them. We are even directly referenced in these written prophecies, but not by name. As with all things with the Dreamers, everything is metaphor, symbol. Dahnai, their name for you is the same one Aria gave you when she met you. The Valkyrie. That Aria repeated that name tells us that she is a true Oracle."

"I never had any doubt about that," Jason said simply.

“The Confederation, many of the rulers and races that comprise it, they are all referenced in these prophecies by similarly obscure titles,” Zaa continued, looking at Jason. “Kreel, you are known as the Tupa, which is an animal from their homeworld known for its cleverness and cunning. Krirara, you are known as the Judge. Sk’Vrae, their name for you is the Avenger. However, what I find curious is that Aria never used your title from these prophecies, because you are well documented,” Zaa told him. “In their writings, Jason, you are nearly a religious figure. They equate you to the Christian Moses, a savior who comes to free them from their tribulations and bondage and delivers them to their promised land. In your Terran mythology, as Moses led the Israelites from bondage in Egypt and brought them to their promised land, so they see you as *their* Moses.”

“And what did they name our religious figure here?” Kreel asked.

“The Phoenix,” she answered, reaching out and touching the golden phoenix inlay on the chest of his armor, part of the house crest. “But you will find no drawings of this image anywhere on their homeworld. It is the greatest taboo to try to depict it...and now I see why. If Sha Ra had seen this image and connected it to the Dreamers, things would have gone very, very differently.”

“Most likely Aria didn’t see him in her dreams the same way her people do because he means something very different to her than he does to the others,” Krirara reasoned. “To her people, he is a savior. To her, he is her *father*.”

“That does sound logical,” Sk’Vrae agreed.

“Well, that makes me feel a bit uncomfortable,” Jason said wryly. “I’m no prophet, I’m no Moses, and God knows I’m no Jesus. But if them putting me on a pedestal means they’ll cooperate, I’m not gonna bitch too much. I’ll correct them *after* we get them out of Andromeda.”

“What this means, friends, is that we will have no trouble with the Dreamers once we clear out the Syndicate. Their cultural leaders know we’re coming, and they know we’re coming to save them, so they will cooperate. And we can be assured that they’ll play their part when we begin the operation, warning the Syndicate of the coming stream and causing them to evacuate their fleet.”

“Stream?” Dahnai asked.

“That’s how we’re going to do it, an artificial antimatter stream, a high velocity cloud of neutrally charged antimatter gas coming in from intergalactic space,” Jason answered, noticing that Krirara’s eyes lit up a bit and she nodded emphatically. “The burst cloud will be large enough to encompass the entire moon and have enough mass and velocity to get there before it dissipates. It’ll lose nearly two thirds of its mass as it interacts with the solar wind as it comes in, but enough of it will get to the moon to create enough energy to burn the moon’s surface to a crisp when the antimatter collides with the moon’s atmosphere. We’ve got all the equipment in place to release it, we’re just waiting for the timeline to get set before we can put the plan in motion.” He chuckled grimly. “It’ll be quite a spectacle as it comes in, a giant cloud of boiling, writhing fire with the diameter of a planet racing in from flat space. That’s how it’ll look.”

“Fire?” Kreel asked.

“The cloud will interact with the solar wind coming from the star, and from the galaxy itself,” Jason told him. “Solar wind includes particles of matter, Kreel, and those will hit the antimatter cloud and annihilate the antimatter. So there’s gonna be a whole lot of explosions and energy released from the leading edge as the antimatter gets bombarded by the solar wind. There have been documented cases of antimatter streams reaching the borders of a galaxy before the galaxy’s solar wind dissipates it, but never one this big.”

“That’s fairly clever,” Krirara mused, tapping her muzzle in much the same way the Kimdori did. It had to be a muzzle thing. “Antimatter streams are not a completely unknown phenomenon along the rim of the galaxy in Kirri territory, but they’re usually quite small. Our scientists study them.”

“Explain this one to me, the Union’s not on the rim,” Kreel said.

“Antimatter streams come in from intergalactic space,” Jason told him. “They’re pockets of antimatter drifting through flat space that hasn’t interacted with enough matter to dissipate it, which is possible in deep flat space where there’s almost no matter particles to interact with them. Galactic gravity pulls them in, and most of them dissipate before they get anywhere near a galaxy due to the solar wind that comes from the galaxy.

But if the mass of antimatter is big enough and is moving fast enough, it can reach the rim of a galaxy. When it does, it burns up as it's eaten away by the solar wind, kind of like a meteor burning up in a planet's atmosphere."

"Just so," Krirara nodded. "We have some images of antimatter streams burning up close to the galactic rim. They are quite spectacular. And no doubt that since the Syndicate has many territories along the rim of Andromeda, they have seen antimatter streams and will understand the danger of them."

"Exactly, that's why we chose it," Jason nodded. "And we have the gear far enough out in flat space that they can't see it. Hell, it'll take the burst nearly twelve days to reach the system once we set it off."

"And that explains the need for a timeline," Dahnai said, to which Jason nodded.

"Yeah, we have to have everything in place and the plans finalized before we set it off."

"So, this means we don't have to do things carefully to fool the dreamers?" Dahnai asked.

"Not quite, Dahnai," Zaa told him. "Remember that there are some Oracles that are so lost that they will do as they are told and will predict the event as an attack rather than a natural phenomenon, so we still have to move carefully. But what this does mean is that most of the Oracles will lie, will tell the Syndicate they foresee cataclysm because their prophecies tell them that it is the omen of their own salvation. They will lie to the Syndicate as Aria lied to Sha Ra to secure their freedom," Zaa declared. "We just have to make it scientifically feasible. The Syndicate has to see doom coming when they point their sensors towards the stream, which will be reinforced by the predictions of the Oracles."

"They're gonna see that," Jason said with grim amusement. "A high-velocity cloud of neutral antimatter gas is all but unstoppable, at least for Syndicate tech."

"What does it mean being neutral, and why does it matter, Jayce?" Kreel asked. "I'm no physicist."

“Most antimatter used in weapons and energy generation is electrically charged, polarized,” Jason explained. “The fact that it’s charged means that it can be affected by electromagnetic containment. Neutral antimatter *can’t*. It doesn’t react to electromagnetic containment fields. It can only be contained with spatial traps and other non-reactive techniques, and the Syndicate doesn’t have that tech. All the antimatter they produce and use is charged. What we’re throwing at them is something they can’t stop with their current technology.”

“Could a hard shield not stop the antimatter?” Krirara asked. “From what I recall, shields are pure energy. There’s no matter for the antimatter to react with it.”

“Yes it can, at least if the hard shield is set up to be able to deal with antimatter. But you’re wrong that hard shields are pure energy,” he told her. “Most forms of energy have mass, Krirara, only energy like light and artificially produced massless tachyons don’t. Your own technology creates shields from energy that has a very tiny amount of mass, but still mass. Despite that, you can still tune most any conventional shield to stop antimatter without making it blow up, it’s not hard. But that’s a moot point, since the Syndicate doesn’t have the tech to build a planetary shield,” he answered. “And remember, their super-ships don’t have shields either. They’re too big for them to shield, they don’t have the tech to do it. That’s why they have such thick armor, since they don’t have shields. Those ships would literally be cooked by the antimatter bombardment when that armor heats up and eventually melts, then that heat conducts into the ship. Everything inside the ship will cook from the hull in.”

“I see. And what stops them from simply moving their fleet behind the moon to avoid the stream?”

“Some of them they can,” he admitted. “That’s why we’re expecting a pretty large operation to destroy those ships. But a fleet that large won’t be easy to cram behind the moon, and why even bother trying to keep the fleet there if what you’re defending is about to get turned into molten slag by a cosmic event? We’re sure they’ll have some ships hide behind the moon and ride out the stream, if only to have visual confirmation that the moon was destroyed. Navii predicts that we might have to deal with a fleet of

about a thousand ships. The rest, we're confident will be told to retreat to save themselves."

"Ah. Ahhhhh," she said, her eyes widening slightly. "Most clever, Jason. Your solution leaves the Syndicate with no real option but to retreat."

"Thank you," he said modestly. "From the Syndicate's point of view, what's coming is unstoppable and large enough to eradicate all life on the Dreamer's moon. And if we time it just right, the Syndicate will only have about four hours to react once their sensors detect the stream and they can see it coming. That gives them just enough time to call their HQ and get their orders to evacuate, but not enough time to try to come up with some plan to save the moon or try to evacuate the Dreamers."

"Ouch," Kreel sounded. "So, the tricky part's gonna be fooling the Oracles that won't lie."

"Yup," Jason replied. "But we can do it. Between what Zaa's infiltrators have dug up and our own talks with Aria, we know how to get around them."

"And can you explain that to the rest of us?" Dahnai asked.

He glanced at her. "It's a bit tricky," he replied. "It all relies on *intent*. The future isn't set, and the Oracles see things in a moment of time depending on the conditions that exist in that moment that they make the prediction," he explained to her. "When an Oracle sees the future, they see it as a confluence of past, present and future events that exist *only at that moment*. Since the future isn't set, that means that these conditions can change, but the Oracles can't see that unless they look again and make another prediction. This is what Zaa has coined a *snapshot*, an image of the future at a certain point in time. It's this peculiarity in how the Dreamers' power works, combined with the fact that their power doesn't allow them to foresee their own deaths, that will let us trick them."

He touched his gestalt and projected out a simple hologram of a window in a building and a human child. "Here, look at it this way. Imagine that the window is the Dreamer moon, and this kid here is us," he said, pointing at the child in the hologram. "The kid's holding a rock, and then throws it at the window. That's the snapshot. This is what they see in that moment, the intention of the kid to break the window with the rock, and the rock flying

through the air towards the window. This is the condition we have to set up to fool the Oracles, and keep it this way as long as possible so any new predictions don't see any change in conditions that causes a change in the prediction." The rock continued to fly towards the window in his hologram. "But there's another part of this equation, intent. This is why it's gonna be tricky. Guys, when we start this, when whoever gives the order to set off the stream does it, they have to *mean it*. They have to give that order with the full intention of destroying the Dreamer homeworld, because their intent creates the conditions that will cause the Dreamers to see what's coming as an extinction-level cataclysm rather than a deliberate attack. If whoever gives the order knows that it's not going to be carried out, the Oracles will see through the plan. So, one of the things we'll be doing during this summit is picking one leader who is capable of giving that order with the full intention of carrying it out," he said calmly. "I'm not going to be able to do it, because I'm too involved in this. But even I understand that if our plan fails, we *must allow the Dreamers to be destroyed*," he said intensely. "We can't leave them in the hands of the Syndicate. We just *can't*. Even if it means wiping them out, we have to take the Dreamers away from the Syndicate. So, while I could give that order, my involvement in the operation as a rigger would disqualify me because my intent as that rigger and my knowledge of the battle plan means that I wouldn't be able to fool the Dreamers."

"You don't have to look for a volunteer, Jason," Sk'Vrae said simply. "I could give that order without doubt or reservation, because I understand what you just said. One way or another, the Dreamers must be taken from the Syndicate. Alive...or dead. When the time comes, I can issue that order with the intention of destroying the Dreamers."

"Trust me, Sk'Vrae, I don't think any less of you for both volunteering and being capable of doing it," Jason told her candidly. "I'd do it myself, but as I said, my involvement in the battle plan as a rigger contaminates me."

"Fear not, Jason. When the time comes, I can do what must be done," the Urumi said gravely. "It is my duty to my people as the Brood Queen. Their safety and survival is paramount."

Jason reached over and gently put a hand on her forearm.

“That’s about it. How we save the Dreamers is by stepping in at the last possible instant to avert the disaster, deflecting the rock away from the window, so the Oracles see the events unfold as they first saw them and the Syndicate acts on that information in the way we want them to. And in a way, that’s the simple beauty of this plan. Since we won’t change the course of events unless the Syndicate does what we need them to do, the Oracles won’t see the change in the future until it’s all but too late. The instant they decide *not* to evacuate the fleet, then the original course of events reasserts itself and the Dreamers and their moon will be destroyed. So, they can’t save both themselves and the Dreamers, and knowing what we know of the Benga, we know who they’re gonna pick.”

“They’ll abandon the Dreamers to the stream and evacuate as many of their own people as they can,” Dahnai predicted.

“That’s what Lorna and the command staff think will happen,” he nodded.

“There’s a flaw in that plan, Jayce,” Kreel said. “What about the Dreamers the Benga sweep up with them in the evacuation and take with them? They won’t want to give up their Oracles, so they’ll grab as many Dreamers as they can as they evacuate and take them with them. They’re gonna have enough to breed up more of them, and they get more Oracles in a few years.”

“That’s where she comes in,” Jason said, pointing at a smiling Zaa. “Her children are going to find every single fucking Dreamer still in Andromeda after our operation and conduct missions to get them out...or kill them,” he sighed. “Some of them work with the Benga willingly, and those Dreamers will be killed. The rest will be located and then taken from Andromeda and brought to their new home. It may take a few months, maybe even a year, but I’m completely confident in the Denmother’s operatives.”

“I’ve already started that operation,” Zaa told them. “I have spy probes in the system that will report where the Dreamers they take in the evacuation are taken, and we can conduct future operations to retrieve them once they’re resettled. My Handgroom on E Chaio, Kraal, is also locating Dreamers not on their homeworld. And as he finds them, I will send teams to either rescue or assassinate them, as needs require.”

“The nexus bridge will make that easy,” Krirara predicted. “They take a beacon with them, find the Dreamer, set it up, then simply take them through. They might even be able to grab the Oracles out of the Syndicate ships, the way you rescued Aria.”

“I knew there was a good reason we invented it,” Jason said lightly. “And yes, my Marines are training for extraction operations as we speak. We’re going to save as many Oracles as possible, even the ones on the ships. Hell, I have a new unit of special ops training for general small unit raids and operations using the bridge, bridging in deep behind enemy lines to conduct operations of surveillance, espionage, and sabotage. I wanted a dedicated unit specially trained in that kind of warfare. They’re almost ready,” he said proudly.

“Yeah, that’s one of the things Lorna wants the bridge for,” Dahnai agreed. “So the CCM can conduct small unit raids on critical Syndicate facilities. And from what I heard, it’s only gonna get better and better,” she grinned.

“What do you mean?” Krirara asked.

“Jason’s got some of his best people on the bridges to refine the tech,” Dahnai answered. “Make the wormholes more stable, last longer, open faster, and the big one, be able to build the nexus system on a planet instead of out in deep space. Last Lorna told me, they’re working on a way to make a stable permanent two-way nexus like how the Stargates work built on a planet’s surface. Two nexus units link together, and boom, a permanent stable doorway between two planets. Think about it, a spaceport holding a nexus bridge where people can just walk through a nexus instead of board a transport, and they’re where they wanted to go. Think of how useful that could be, if we, say, put up a nexus between Draconis and Terra. My Academy students could live at home and just walk through a bridge, then head to school.”

“I think Lorna’s talking way too damn much,” Jason complained, which made Dahnai laugh.

“She may command the CCM, but she’s *my* military advisor, Jayce,” she grinned at him.

“The nexus system does have some very intriguing possibilities,” Sk’Vrae said.

“Your example isn’t a good one, Dahnai,” Jason noted. “You have no idea how much power a nexus draws when it’s operating. It’s a very expensive piece of tech to use, it comes out to about eighty thousand credits a person once you average it out.”

“Now. In five years, once Myleena’s had time to advance bridge technology, we’ll see,” Dahnai said with a smile at him. “I think those costs will come way down when you figure out a way to build one on a planet’s surface.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Jason admitted.

Their dropship landed at Jaxtra, which ended the conversation, and Zaa took her leave and disembarked. They then took Dahnai to the summer palace, dropping her and Sk’Vrae off, then they headed back home. Kreel and Krirara were following their usual pattern of staying with Jason in the guest bedrooms, since neither of them needed much in the way of opulence. They both much preferred staying in Jason’s house to some luxury penthouse, mainly for the company. They were his best friends on the council outside of Dahnai, and everyone on the strip adored them both. They were both quite comfortable on the strip, with lots of friends and always feeling at home...at home enough for Krirara to bring her husband Krarrik. Krirara just had to fawn over Jon and Julia a little bit when they came in, and after dinner, the two of them joined Jason and his family out on the deck, watching the kids play on the beach in the late afternoon as they enjoyed a little wine, a little Makati ale, and some good company.

So, just how much of the plan are you gonna reveal to the council tomorrow? Kreel asked as he took a long drink of ale. He was wearing only his favorite pair of Bermuda shorts—seriously, he was in love with those shorts, scratching a bit at his sleek furry chest

Enough of it so everyone knows what’s going on, but not so much that the plan might be jeopardized by too many people knowing about it. Remember, every person that knows the truth of the plan jeopardizes it if they can’t maintain the intent to carry out the destruction of the moon if the plan goes awry. So, the more pacifistic members of the council like Magran,

they'll only hear what they need to hear to prevent them from contaminating the visions of the Oracles. The main thing about tomorrow is getting Lorna to establish a hard timetable. She'll do that once she has everything ready.

I thought she already did, Krirara noted.

Almost, he answered. *We're waiting for the Makria and the Lovarians to finish the IP upgrades on the ships they're sending, which should be in about two days.*

That's no reason to slow things down. It's gonna take twelve for the stream to get there, Kreel observed.

Lorna wanted hard estimates, not the usual Lovarian "oh, maybe a couple of days or so."

Krirara laughed. *The Lovarians are so very similar to the Grimja,* she sent, giving Kreel a sly smile.

We like to have a good time. They're just lazy, Kreel sent in defense. *I don't see how Holikk puts up with them.*

I thought you were good friends with the Prevarate.

Well, yeah, but that's personal. I like Brou a lot, he's a ton of fun at the pub, but he even irritates me sometimes with how noncommittal he can be, Kreel answered. Kreel's status as the representative from the Confederation to the Coalition Congress gave him much more experience with the varied Coalition rulers. *I don't think there's words in the Lovarian language for yes or no. It's always well, kinda-sorta maybe. Nothing about the Lovarians is ever direct.*

Poor baby, facing the ultimate expression of Grimja capriciousness, Krirara grinned.

Bite me, Krirara, he retorted, which made Jason laugh.

Jyslin and Krarrik came out from the house and joined them, Jyslin in her usual beach attire of nothing. They switched to speaking for Krarrik's benefit. "How are the babies, Jys?" Jason asked.

"Jon's finally asleep," she answered. "I swear, that boy is going to be an insomniac when he grows up. Krarrik was quite a help getting him down."

“Kremrik was also hard to get down for his nap, I have experience,” he said with a smile as he sat beside Krirara and took her hand.

“It’s the fur. Bareskin babies have a thing for fur,” Kreel grinned.

“Julia does seem to love to pull mine when I hold her,” Krirara chuckled.

“I can’t let her anywhere near my whiskers, or I won’t have them,” Kreel added.

“They grow back fast,” Jyslin told him lightly, taking a glass of wine from Seido with a nod of thanks. She set down a replacement tankard of ale for Kreel, then went back inside.

“So, how’s it feel owning the first seed team in the playoffs, Jys?” Kreel asked.

She laughed. “It feels damn good after what happened last year,” she answered. The Paladins had clinched first seed in their last match, meaning that the path to the Empress’ Cup went through Karis on their side of the playoff bracket. “We just might win the bet with Yila.”

“The Tigers are playing for first seed on their side of the bracket,” Jason reminded her. “If we meet in the finals, the bet’s a draw.”

“Well, we can hope they lose,” she said with a malicious grin. “The team’s still so pissed over losing in the first round last year, I almost feel sorry for whoever we play first in the playoffs. Every girl has revenge burning in her eyes right now.”

“Three games left in the season though, you gonna ease off a bit?”

“Fuck no, we want to sweep our last three matches and storm into the playoffs like a rampaging Goraga,” she replied fiercely. “But since we have clinched the first seed, the coaching staff is going to experiment a little in our last three matches so we have a few surprises under our robes for the playoffs. Throwaway games are great opportunities to test out things like that. We’re also gonna give a few promising girls from the practice squad some playing time, just in case we have to make roster swaps in the playoffs.”

“Sounds like it’s gonna be fun,” Kreel said. “So, what’s it gonna take to score some tickets to the playoff games?”

“You don’t have enough in your shorts to get tickets for *those* games, Kreel,” she replied bluntly, which made Jason burst out laughing.

“You’ve never seen me excited, Jys,” Kreel grinned at her.

“And I hope I never do,” she retorted.

“Come on now, you married outside your species, you can’t be that priggish,” he teased.

The stare she leveled at him made both Krirara and Krarrik explode into laughter. Luckily, Rann, Shya, and Aria saved Kreel from a fur-searing response, running up from the house. All three of them were nude, carrying snorkeling masks. It hadn’t taken Jyslin long to subvert Aria’s modesty. “We’re gonna go over the Latoiya’s house, Mom,” Rann declared. “We’re gonna go snorkeling!”

“Alright, pips, be home for dinner,” Jyslin answered. “And be careful, Aria’s still new to it.”

“I’ll be alright, Pamma,” Aria assured her. “I’m getting better at swimming.”

“Still, I’m gonna have Cybi follow you with a camera pod, just in case.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Go have fun,” she said, swatting Rann on the bottom very gently when they turned to go down to the end of the strip. She put a finger on her interface, and he heard her commune, asking Cybi to keep an eye on the kids. In reply, a camera pod floating over the house zipped away to follow them. That was all subterfuge, though, and it showed how careful Jyslin was about how she used her Generation abilities in company.

“Now who is that,” Krirara said, as they looked up to see a large, imposing dropship approach the strip, pass over the fence, then land behind the house.

“It’s a Verutan Imperial dropship...Shakizarr?” Jason asked curiously. *Who’s in that dropship, Kaera?*

Emperor Shakizarr, Imperator Enva, and High Archon Gau, she answered. They didn't announce they were coming. The automated defenses nearly shot at them.

Sorry, we weren't exactly planning on coming, Enva sent. We were on our way back to the hotels and Gau decided to stop here. He wants to look at your tree, Jason. He says it has something to do with an omen.

Why am I not surprised, Jason sent back in amusement. Bring them out to the deck, Kaera, at least as soon as Gau's done at the tree.

Of course, your Grace.

"It's Enva, Shakizarr, and Gau," Jason said, mainly for Krarrik. "I'm a bit surprised Enva's riding with those two."

"Enva has a lot of friends on the council, Jayce," Kreel said.

Can you get some drinks ready for them, Seido? Remember Gau's religious restrictions?

I do, Jayce. I'll have some out in a minute.

I'd prefer some oye juice, Seido, Enva supplied.

I have some fresh squeezed, she answered.

That sounds lovely.

Shakizarr and Enva came around the house, and Jason accepted them at the table. Both of them were wearing very casual clothes, Shakizarr wearing those latex-tight knicker pants he favored when he came to the beach, leaving his muscular, green and black furred torso bare, and Enva in her usual nothing. They sat down at the table when Jason motioned, and Seido scurried out with a tray and set down drinks for them. "What brings you two by, other than Gau?" Jason asked.

"Actually, not much more than a desire for good company," Shakizarr said honestly, taking a long drink of the Verutan ale Jason kept in the house. "And to discuss the upcoming Dreamer operation in a little more detail. Everyone knows that you know more about what the CCM has planned than anyone else, Jason."

“Lorna is my aunt,” Jason chuckled. “And since I’m *in* the CCM as a rigger, those battle plans matter to me on a personal level.”

“You’ve started something of a wave of militaristic interest, Jason,” Enva smiled at him. “I’ve heard from five different council members how they admire what you do and consider undergoing formal military training themselves.”

“I know for a fact Grran’s going to be involved personally,” Krirara said. “He intends to command one of the warships going in using a bionoid.”

“He’s commanded a ship before, it’s how he got to be Field Marshall,” Jason said easily. “He’s probably the most experienced military man on the council. The only ones that come anywhere close to him are Shakizarr here, Mufar, Jokrik, and Quord.”

“He has many more years of experience than I do,” Shakizarr admitted. “And he’s a military genius, so I give weight to his advice when it comes to military matters.”

“I think all the Jobodi are,” Jason said, then took a drink. “They have a knack for it.”

“I have to admit, watching you and riding in your Titan has made me interested,” Shakizarr continued. “I’m going to undergo formal rigger training when I get home, something I’ve never done before. I can operate an exomech, but I’ve never taken the comprehensive training in tactics. Mainly because none of my officers feel comfortable giving me orders,” he chuckled.

Jason laughed himself. “My company commander enjoys bossing me around,” he replied. “Then again, I had to find a commander both willing to take me and had no problems bossing around her boss.”

“Given how good you are, why would a commander not take you?”

“Because of the distraction having me in the company can cause, on top of the fact that if the enemy finds out I’m a rigger and figures out where I am, her company can get targeted,” he answered. “So there’s some risk in taking me on.”

Jason repeated quite a bit of what he'd told the others in the dropship to Shakizarr, Enva, and Gau when he joined them, explaining the quirks in how the Oracles' powers worked and how they were going to exploit them to trick the Syndicate. Cybi and Cyra joined them with their bionoids halfway through his explanation, taking seats at the table and listening. "Sk'Vrae already volunteered to be the one that sets the plan in motion," he surmised. "I can admit, she has the mental fortitude to press that button and *mean it*, and that's what it will take. When she gives that order, she has to have the full intent to destroy the Dreamer's moon, and the rest of us have to have the intent to allow it to happen. Because of that, we're not going to fully reveal the entire plan to the council. There are members that might contaminate it with their compassion."

"It's a sad day when compassion is a liability," Enva said darkly.

"In this instance, it can be," Jason replied. "I don't like the idea of destroying the Dreamers, but we absolutely cannot allow the Syndicate to keep control of them, else we'll never have peace, and they'll be an eternal threat to the entire galactic cluster. That's why we set this up the way we did. Unless the Syndicate evacuates the fleet, then the stream will hit the moon and destroy the Dreamers," he said grimly. "That will cause the Oracles working with the Benga to see what's coming as a cataclysm that destroys everything, and things are going to happen too fast for them to think too much about it. The Syndicate will only have four hours' warning. Their sensor technology will detect the stream when it's four hours out, and that's a big part of our plan. Things will be far too immediate, too dire, for the Syndicate commanders to waffle over what to do. They give the order quickly, or a large portion of that hundred thousand ship fleet is going to fry."

"I'm confident in Sk'Vrae's determination, and it makes me respect her that much more," Shakizarr said.

"It doesn't make her evil, it means she is devoted to the protection of her people," Gau agreed. "Were I in a situation like that, I would also press that button."

"So, if things go right, twelve days later we attack," Enva said.

Jason nodded. “What the summit will be about is mainly getting the plan into motion. Lorna’s going to present it tomorrow morning, and hopefully we vote on it that afternoon, after everyone’s had a chance to look it over. We could have the operation underway by tomorrow night local time.”

“I think everyone’s ready.”

“The Lovarians are dragging their feet, as usual,” Jason chuckled. “And the Makria said they should have their timeline for their refits solid by tomorrow. If they can finish their refits in ten days, we can put the plan in motion.”

“Holikk can make sure that happens,” Kreel said. “As the High Chancellor, he can use his power to get some additional manpower to the Makria and Lovarians to help them finish. Which may be what the Lovarians are fishing for,” he laughed. “Their best work is always getting someone else to do it for them.”

Rann, Shya, and Aria came up onto the deck and approached enough to get their attention, their hair dripping wet. “How was the snorkeling, pippy?” Jyslin asked, putting her arm around her son.

“It was okay,” he replied. “We didn’t see many fish, though.”

“But it was still fun,” Shya added. “We’re getting hungry.”

“Seido and Ayama are cooking dinner right now,” Jason told them. “But I’m sure they’ll give you a snack to hold you over.”

After they went in, Shakizarr turned to watch them go, then looked over at Jason. “Has she made any other predictions?” he asked quietly.

“Not really,” he answered. “But then again, we don’t ask her to. She’s afraid of her power. Hell, she’s still afraid of sleeping, she has to use the sleep inducer most of the time.”

“The doctors said it may take years before she recovers from the trauma,” Jyslin said, empathy shimmering in her voice. “But she’s come a long way since Jason pulled her out of that ship.”

“She’s nearly a quarter of a shakra taller since the last time I saw her,” Shakizarr noted.

“The doctors have her on growth acceleration to get her to where she should be height wise, on top of the fact that she’s entered her pubescent growth spurt,” Jason answered. “She outgrows her clothes in about fifteen days,” he added with a chuckle.

“We had to switch to an entire wardrobe of memory fabric,” Jyslin laughed. “And from the look of it, her breasts are just about ready to develop. I have high hopes she grows a nice large rack. She’s already pretty, so with some good healthy tits and her exotic skin, she’s going to have boys chasing *her*. Trelle, I hope so.”

Jason gave her a level look.

“Stay out of it, baby,” she grinned at him. “She’s a *Faey*. That means she gets to sit on every boy she can get out of his underwear. That’s what Faey girls do.”

“Sometimes I wonder why I married you.”

“Self-preservation, because you were either gonna marry me or I was gonna kill you,” she replied, which made Enva laugh.

“His priggishness only applies to his daughters, I’ve noticed,” Krirara said slyly.

“I don’t care if they’re Faey girls or not, they’re *my* daughters, and I was raised Terran,” he declared adamantly. “Any boy I catch with my girls is getting exiled to freakin’ Andromeda.”

“So, there is a culture clash in the house,” Shakizarr chuckled. “I’ve always wondered if there was any friction between you two.”

“Not usually, except when it comes to him accepting that what he loves about adult Faey women applies to his own daughters,” Jyslin grinned at Jason. “Aria’s just the tip of Demir’s sword, baby. In about seven years, the older girls are going to be looking at boys for an entirely new reason.”

“I have a plan for that,” he said stonily, which made Jyslin laugh.

Their guests stayed for dinner, and Seido and Ayama made sure to cook for the very different species at the table. Kreel couldn’t eat meat, and Gau couldn’t eat most vegetables—for religious reasons, not biological—where Shakizarr heavily preferred meat to anything else. Shakizarr gave a bit of a

surprised look when Seido set down plates for Cybi and Cyra as well. “I take it Rook solved the eating problem?” he asked.

“He did, your Grand Imperial Majesty,” Cybi answered, picking up her fork and knife. “We’ve been able to ingest solid food for a couple of takirs. It’s been quite an interesting experience.”

“Are you incorporating that into our bionoids?” he asked Jason.

“I wasn’t really thinking about it, but I guess we could,” he replied. “Actually, it would be a good idea, now that I think about it. It lets rulers be polite at a dinner in their honor by actually eating.”

“Wasn’t Rook about to upgrade the Hall of Peace bionoids anyway?” Jyslin asked.

“It’s on the schedule,” Cyra nodded in reply, then she took a bite of the shrimp scampi Seido had placed in front of her. “The new version will have the latest biorhythmic upgrades and an upgrade to the sensor mesh encoding/decoding system to make it less processor intensive, and I guess we should tell him to include the gastric system?” she asked, looking to Jason.

“May as well,” he nodded.

“What about our bionoids on Terra?” Kreel asked.

“He hasn’t imported the new system into the moleculartronic units yet, he’s working on that right now,” Jason answered. “It may take him a while. The system he designed relies on Karinne technology, so he has to come up with a different approach for the moleculartronic units.”

“So, how do you find eating?” Krirara asked the CBIMs.

“It’s an unusual experience, and oddly satisfying,” Cybi answered.

“I had no idea food had so many flavors, so many textures,” Cyra added. “We’ve spent the last takir visiting restaurants of different culinary traditions and exploring the world of food.”

“Any favorites?”

“I very much like Makati food,” she replied.

“And we think she’s got a crack in her core crystal for thinking so,” Cybi replied, which made Cyra give her a smug smile, and also made Kreel laugh.

“So, you don’t all like the same things?”

“Does every Grimja like what you like, Kreel?” Cybi challenged.

“Yeah, but I thought you CBIMs were built the same way. I’d think that means that you’d have the same likes and dislikes when it comes to something like food.”

“If you think all the CBIMs are alike, you really don’t pay much attention,” Jyslin chided him.

“I don’t mean personality wise, I mean I thought they’d process sensory data the same way,” he defended. “So they’d like the same things.”

“That’s not how it works for biological people either, Kreel,” Jason told him. “CBIMs aren’t *exactly* identical. Each one is unique, and that uniqueness gives them different likes and dislikes from everything from music to food.”

“I can’t see what Cyvanne sees in Terran heavy metal music,” Cybi sniffed. “It sounds like two *krees* fighting.”

“Spoken like a curmudgeon harping about how kids nowadays have no good taste. And watch it, lady, you’re talking about music *I* like,” Jason teased, which made Jyslin laugh.

“It’s a phase, she’ll outgrow it,” Cyra predicted. “She’d *better*, or we’ll isolate her biogenic feeds into the network.”

“What, she blasts it into the network?” Kreel asked, then he laughed.

“Anytime she wants to annoy us,” Cybi complained, which made Kreel laugh even harder.

“I had no idea things were so contentious between you,” Gau said with a chuckle.

“Cyvanne is Cyvanne,” Cybi sighed. “If she’s not in trouble, she’s not having fun.”

“That’s what makes her so fun,” Kreel grinned.

“What’s the new one like? Cyrsi?” Gau asked.

“She’s coming along,” Jason said proudly. “She’s moved beyond her personality template and turned into an intensely curious young lady that likes to look at the universe with the same wonder as a child. So, I assigned her as the primary CBIM in service to the KES so she can satisfy that curiosity.”

“Cyrsi is an adorable young CBIM,” Cybi said with a smile. “She’s like our baby sister.”

“What kind of music does she like?” Kreel asked.

“Faey goth mainly,” Jason replied. “But she’s got an eclectic sense of style when it comes to music and art.”

“And the new CBMOM?” Gau asked.

“She’s still too young to move very far past her personality template, but she’s developing nicely,” he answered. “She’s starting to display individuality; she just needs time and experience to find her own place in things and she’ll be just fine.”

“I do rather like Cori,” Cyra admitted. “A bit more stern than Coma, but I think she’ll mellow out as she gets a few missions under her belt.”

“Yeah, Coma suffered from Ensign’s Syndrome too,” Jason agreed.

“Ensign’s Syndrome?” Shakizarr asked.

“A military term for the way a green officer fresh out of OTS acts,” he answered. “The cure for Ensign’s Syndrome is experience.”

“Ah.”

After dinner, the rulers decided to stay at the house, sitting on loungers on the beach and discussing things, but Jason didn’t stay with them for long. He decided to take a walk down the beach, alone, and considered what was coming. If things worked out right tomorrow, the plan would be put in motion. That meant in about 13 days, depending on exactly when it began, he’d be launching from the *Tempest* on a mission to save the Dreamers from the Syndicate. It would be the beginning of the second phase of the war against the Syndicate, a plan to strip them of their biggest

advantage, the Oracles. But it was also an operation to save his kin from the most horrific kind of bondage imaginable.

He...had a good feeling about this. He had no doubt that the fight to liberate the Dreamer homeworld was going to be savage and nasty, but they had a good plan, they had the element of surprise if that plan worked, they would have a hell of a lot of firepower there to get the job done, and one way or another, it would remove the vast majority of the Dreamers from the Syndicate's control.

Either they freed the Dreamers...or they exterminated the Dreamers to deny them to the Syndicate. And there was no middle ground in those choices.

Despite the grim reality of the situation, he still had a good feeling about this. Usually he was frantic with worry about something like this, but today, knowing what he knew...he felt, felt *optimistic*. The plan was solid. The Syndicate wouldn't see it coming. The Oracles would actively conceal the truth from the Syndicate, because their prophecies told them that the Confederation was coming to free them. And the plan would fool the Oracles that were broken and did what they were told. Even if it didn't, Jason foresaw a scenario where some Oracles were saying it was an elaborate trick, while the vast majority of the others were saying what Jason wanted them to say to convince the Syndicate to evacuate their ships from the system. Those conflicting results would make the Board doubt the veracity of the Oracles that saw through the ruse and reported that fact, for they would be just a tiny minority when the vast majority would be screaming *DOOM!* from the rooftops.

He saw no holes in their plan, so he was very hopeful that it was going to work.

But that was just getting them in. Once they were there, he knew it was going to be the most intense battle of his life. There would be at least a thousand Syndicate ships, tens of thousands of enemy mecha, and potentially hundreds of thousands of Benga, maybe even millions, still on the moon that couldn't evacuate in time. The moon had extensive ground batteries and surface to space missile batteries that would make life hell for any ship in low orbit, on top of four different orbital space stations that would have to be taken by force. There would be a heavy military presence

both in orbit around the moon and on the moon itself, and the operation to defeat them wasn't going to be quick or easy. Lorna was predicting a 19 day operation to secure complete military control of the Dreamer homeworld, from defeating the Syndicate Navy to clearing out the military installations elsewhere in the system to executing a ground invasion of the moon and taking it by force.

But it would be worth it. The Dreamers were Faey, and that meant that they were his kin, they were his people. Much as he often pretended not to be any part Faey, the simple fact of the matter was that he *was*. He wouldn't be on Karis if he wasn't. The Faey were his people as much as the Terrans were...as much as the Kimdori were. He was a child of three species, and he had loyalty to and a sense of duty to all three. The Dreamers were Faey. The Dreamers were being held in the most cruel form of slavery imaginable.

And by God, he wasn't going to just sit behind his desk and allow that. They were *his people*, and he was going to protect them.

Chapter 4

Kaira, 36 Suraa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 1 February 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Kaira, 36 Suraa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

KMS Tempest, orbiting Prakka 21-C, Andromeda

This was it.

Jason stepped out of the alcove of the bionoid storage unit in the bay of his Titan and sorted himself out, settled into the bionoid merge, along with the rest of the Storm Riders. The others were in the Forward Mobile Operations Center down on the moon, sitting in merge pods in a very large pre-fab warehouse along with several hundred other Titan riggers, while Jason was at the MOB at Joint Base Alpha along with several thousand Wolf pilots and mech riggers. He was aware enough of his own body to see and hear the doctors and engineers prowling up and down the rows of merge pods, doing final checks of merge telemetry to make sure every merged pilot or rigger was good to go.

The operation was going to begin in five hours, and in about one hour, they'd know if their plan was going to work or not. That was when the Syndicate would detect the antimatter stream screaming in from flat space, and they'd find out if their ships would evacuate. Whether it worked or not, they had to be in place and ready to execute the battle plan...and for the Storm Riders, that meant in their rigs and ready to launch when the time came.

The battle plan was set. The CCM knew what they were going to do, and they'd spent the last 12 days training for the operation. There was nothing to do now but get it done.

Jason glanced at a viewscreen showing the view from the port of the ship and saw a truly impressive sight. The *Tianne* and *Kinai* were visible in the distance, the two city-sized ships hovering in the dim white Andromedan sky with swarms of smaller ships around them. There were nearly 10,000 Naval vessels from 75 empires in that fleet, each one devoting a small portion of its fleet, but enough of them doing so to build a truly formidable military force. The KMS, on the other hand, had devoted every active ship to the battle plan, from the fleet flagships all the way down to the newest frigate to come off the docks, and a significant portion of the Army was in jumpers on the troop transports, ready to land on the Dreamer homeworld and liberate it. They'd be mixed in with infantry and armor from other empires, with the KMS and Imperial Marines serving as telepathic defense against Benga mindstrickers. In all, they had 550,000 troops that were going to land on the moon and secure it, with the majority of them attacking the lone Benga city on the moon. The rest would be attacking military bases, outposts, and government facilities scattered across the planet that kept an eye on the Dreamers

Lorna and the CCM were confident they had the manpower to take the homeworld, but it wasn't going to be easy. The Benga would protect their hold on the Dreamers, and the moment they felt that the moon was going to be lost, they'd try to destroy it. Because of that, the landing operation wasn't scheduled to begin until every single super-ship they faced was destroyed, to ensure that they didn't try to ram the moon and wipe out all life on it. On the surface, Kimdori infiltrators were in place to disable or destroy all 16 of the doomsday weapons on the moon, there to wipe out the Dreamers to prevent the Consortium from taking them. So, even when the operation began, Jason wasn't going anywhere possibly for many hours, yet he had to be in his rig and ready to bounce at any time. Until they called for the ground invasion to begin, all the riggers and infantry could do was be ready to deploy...and wait.

Hurry up and wait, one of the tenets of military service no matter what empire to which one belonged.

Either way, this was going to be a very long, protracted battle. Lorna estimated that it would take them three weeks to secure the moon, with the major operation of taking the Benga's city and the major military installations in the system taking three days. The rest of that time would be

spent hunting down and neutralizing the scattered remnants of the Syndicate military forces trapped on the moon and surrounding bases and installations in the system.

He glanced the newest “ship” in the KMS inventory. It looked almost like a Borg cube, and it wasn’t actually a ship at all. It was several thousand Jack in the Boxes all stacked up and annealed together to form a giant cube. It would be towed in by a cruiser, and then it would break apart and the individual boxes would attack the Syndicate super-ships. Most of the Rockers and a few dozen thousand Gladiators were in those boxes, there to set off the Megatron units and defend the box until the Megatron was ready to fire. The boxes were Lorna’s idea, but 3D and the KMS had teched it up to turn them into a very formidable military asset that would be the bane of the super-ships, thanks to diffusers and IP armor on the boxes to nullify most of the enemy’s weapons. They’d have to burn antimatter missiles on the boxes to destroy them easily, and every missile fired at a box was a missile *not* fired at ships holding flesh and blood people.

The best part? The boxes were no longer expendable. Bo had come up with the rather brilliant idea of using a Torsion blade and a Teryon drill to cut out the surface of the armor and then hollow out a hole within the armor of the super-ship and put the Megatron unit inside it, then cover it over and annealing the cap once the Megatron was anchored, aligned, and in its firing sequence. All they had to do was put the Megatron on a platform that would sit in the round-bottomed crater stably and let the unit aim from that stable base. That was what the on-site techs needed to be there to do, getting the unit set up and aimed, and once it was in its firing sequence, they could leave it hidden under the ship’s armor as the box bugged out, leaving at the last moment to allow the box to get to minimum safe distance.

The change in the boxes was due to the exomechs and Rockers inside. The box itself was expendable, but those units were expensive, and Jason wasn’t going to just throw them away. It also removed the need for the units to be picked up after they bugged out. Now, they could just ride in the box to their next target, given that each box would be carrying 10 Megatron units. A single box could attack multiple super-ships.

If the Karinnes were good at anything, it was adapting. The old Clint Eastwood line from *Heartbreak Ridge* was nearly the motto of the KMS: “*Improvise, adapt, and overcome.*”

Those boxes weren’t the only 3D toys that would be part of this operation. Bo, Maggie, and Talty were going to be overseeing a whole lot of automated weapons from a 3D command post inside the *Tianne*, and the biggest one was going to be stellar collectors. They’d proven effective against super-ships, so Lorna had had Jason add every collector he could find to the operation’s assets, to the point where they’d pulled a few dozen of them from Karis’ planetary defense network.

He almost felt sorry for the Syndicate ships that stayed behind. They’d be attacked from all sides and have no idea what the fuck was going on.

Jason and the other Storm Riders joined the Imperial Marines attached to them for this operation, Kei walking up to him as he put on his helmet. They’d just finished their final briefing and came out to greet the riggers. “Hey Jayce, you ready to saddle up?” she asked.

“Yup. You ready?”

“I’m ready,” she replied, putting on her helmet. “What kind of drones am I going to be operating?” Kei was going to act as a Wizzo when not going after Benga telepaths, and her primary job was to operate the drones, so Jason didn’t have to babysit them.

“The usual complement, plus two Predator drones.”

“Ooooooh,” she almost purred. Predator drones were the largest and most heavily armed of all the drones that Titans could employ, nearly the size of a Gladiator. Like the other Titan drones, they were quadrupedal units built to be very fast on the ground, but where Rover, Spot, and Hound drones were built on a canine frame, Predator drones were built on a feline frame. They looked like seven shakra tall tigers, and they were equipped with some nasty armament. Predator drones were too big to carry in the void spaces in the Titan’s legs, so they were carried in external slings on the back, and they took up a pod mount. To carry the two Predators, Jason had to give up either his heavy pulse cannon or his external missile pack. And Jason being Jason, he gave up his missile pack. No way was he giving up his heavy pulse cannon.

[Everyone stop gawking and saddle up!] Tara ordered.

“Skipper’s getting a bit snippy,” Jason noted.

“So is the Major,” Kei chuckled as her feet left the ground, using the flight pods in her armor. The two of them rose up to the top of the mecha, and as Jason stepped into the narrow tunnel leading to the cockpit, Kei dropped down into the head construct through the top hatch. Once Jason was settled in and the box doors were closed, he delinked from the bionoid and merged to the Titan. He endured the complete sensory deprivation as he started it up, then sorted through the chaotic noise as the sensor mesh system came online and settled down. *[Titan K1 online,]* he reported to the control room on the Whale, then raised his arms, made sure no techs were in his bay space before spreading his legs a little, then started the exercises to fully settle into his merge.

[We’ve got five hours to get through PDs, so nobody needs to hurry,] Tara warned as her Titan on the other end of the hangar started to move.

[I’m getting back startup diagnostics. Everything’s green up here, Jayce,] Kei told him using in-rig intercom commune.

[Same here. Go ahead and warm up the drones while I start on the PDs.]

It took him about twenty minutes to work through his pre-mission diagnostics, then he geared up at the weapons locker. The techs helped mount his heavy pulse cannon and carry sling for the drones, and he pulled down his personal gatling disruptor and slung it over his back, beside the two Predator drones. Just to be sure, he also pulled down a rail cannon and slung it under the drone rack. It was designed to sling between the drone rack and the mecha, sliding down in the void space between them. That would give him another external weapon, just in case he lost his disruptor. *[Going for all the best toys, I see,]* Kei told him impishly.

[Being the Grand Duke doesn’t mean much if I can’t get the cool toys,] he replied as the heavy pulse cannon rose up and then swung into firing position over his left shoulder as he tested it, then put it back into standby. He returned to his bay and anchored in, then had a spinner do a visual of his mecha...and his eyes were almost drawn to the new relief on the chest of his mecha’s armor.

The Legion Phoenix.

The Dreamers called him the Phoenix, Zaa said that their Oracles had seen the bird in their dreams for hundreds of years, so they were capitalizing on that. Every unit the KMS was sending had the Legion Phoenix emblazoned on the chest, to tell the Oracles who they were and what they were there to do.

True, that same icon was on the house crest, which was what was usually on the chest of a Titan, but putting the Legion Phoenix on the chest by itself made it almost impossible to miss Jason's phoenix icon was done in a burnished gold color, with the single visible eye of the bird done in red, with the tips of the wings extending right to the upper corners of the chestplate

And in typical military fashion, they had nothing to do now but wait. If they held to the plan, the fleet wouldn't jump out for another hour, jumping to a point outside the galactic rim in an area the Kimdori had covered with SCM, the final staging point from which they'd jump into the system and begin the attack. Jason maintained his merge with his Titan, but he did pull some strings as the Grand Duke and had Cybi divert some of the feeds and telemetry from the command center back on Karis to his sensory stream, allowing him to get a better look at things. The fleet was assembling into jump formations, he saw, the *Tianne* and the *Kinai* separated to join different squadrons, since the two ships had very different roles in this operation. The *Tianne* was the ship that would be responsible for diverting the antimatter stream using its GRAF cannon, firing it at maximum power and maximum dispersion at a very specific distance, which would punch a hole in the cloud of antimatter through which the Dreamer's moon would pass through. The stream cloud would pass over the moon *almost* harmlessly, with a little atmospheric heating from stray antimatter that would hit the atmosphere, but the sim models showed that the heating wouldn't endanger the Dreamers. The tactic would have the added bonus of pinning the Syndicate fleet behind the moon while the cloud passed, allowing the CCM to get into position to pound them as soon as the firing lines were clear.

The strategy for the Naval segment of the plan was simple: the KMS command ships, INS command ships, and Subrian command ships would

destroy the enemy super-ships at range while the fleet battleships and boxes attacked them from close range with support from tactical battleships, cruisers, and destroyers. A portion of the fleet would defend the ranged units while the destroyers, frigates, fighters, and fast attack craft attacked the Syndicate's smaller ships and enemy exomechs. The dual tactics of both long-range bombardment and close-range attacks would split the Syndicate's forces, and that worked in the CCM's favor. The ten GRAF cannons that would be firing from range was definitely going to draw a hell of a lot of attention, from the eight command ships and the two fleet flagships, to the point where Lorna predicted that the Syndicate would devote more assets to stopping the GRAF cannons than they would the fleet battleships...at least until the first fleet battleship took out a super-ship with its Teryon rail cannon. By spreading the enemy out, forcing them to defend against ships attacking both nose to nose and from thousands of kathra away, it would let the CCM take them out more easily.

It was a simple plan, but sometimes, the simple plans were the best plans.

Jason kept a close eye on the telemetry feeds coming in from KMS HQ as the ships organized, and then jumped literally all the way across Andromeda, a jump that would take nearly three hours due to the fact that they wouldn't jump straight across. They would make the jump in two legs, one to a point in flat space outside Andromeda that would give them line of sight to their destination without passing through the galaxy, and then on to their staging area. The first jump leg was 56 minutes in hyperspace, and when they reached their destination, returning to normal space behind a SCM screen set up by the Kimdori, Jason watched the comm from Zaa's operatives as the fleet reorganized for the second jump.

They could see the stream. Jason knew that they knew about the dire omens given by their Oracles, that the Dreamers were in danger, and that had caused them to send even *more* ships to the Dreamer's homeworld. But the stream was now in their sensor range, and he could literally see the fleet of nearly 300,000 ships in the system start to move. They could see it coming. They now knew what the Oracles were predicting.

This was the moment of truth. Kraal had ears in their military HQ—they really did have lax security on E Chaio—so he'd know what they'd do very

soon. And as soon as he knew, the CCM would know.

[Any word, Jayce?] Kei asked over intercom. *[We've hit the four-hour mark.]*

[I'm watching,] he answered.

[K1, what's the word?] Tara asked over STG.

[None yet, they just detected the stream, they haven't reacted yet,] he answered, which the entire company heard.

Tense moments passed by as Jason both watched the probe visuals from the system and listened in on Kraal's encrypted biogenic comm channel. The fleet continued to move, to pull back away from the approaching stream, and then they started to break up. *[Orders are in,]* Kraal's voice reached him. *[They're ordering the moon evacuated. Wait, more orders,]* he barked. *[They're ordering several large settlements of Dreamers to be evacuated from the surface. They're only ordering the evacuation of their command echelon from the moon. They're going to kill their own people.]*

[How long will it take them to evacuate the Dreamers and command echelon?]

[Two to three hours,] Kraal answered. *[I'll warn the infiltrators to be ready to disable the planet killers within five minutes of receiving orders, just in case they decide to destroy the moon before the stream arrives.]*

[Do so,] Zaa agreed. *[Are they warning the Benga on the ground of the incoming stream?]*

[No. They won't induce a panic,] he answered. *[Only those they want to evacuate will be told.]*

[Kraal, send it down to every infiltrator on the moon; delay that evacuation as much as possible,] Zaa ordered intensely. *[We need to prevent as many ships holding Dreamers from jumping out as we can, so we don't have to hunt them down and retrieve them later. Besides, any Dreamer on an enemy ship is at risk of being killed when the operation begins.]*

[It will be done, Denmother,] Kraal answered.

Jason watched as the Syndicate ships began to jump out. They were evacuating the system! *[How many ships are ordered to remain behind,*

Handgroom?] Zaa asked.

[Only a single tactical fleet, to collect as many Dreamers as they can evacuate as they can. They are ordered to ride out the stream behind the moon, observe the aftermath of the stream, then jump to E Chaio,] he answered. *[That is three thousand ships, my Denmother.]*

Three thousand ships...their fleet would steamroll them in a matter of minutes!

The plan was *working*!

[It's working,] Jason said over STG. *[The Syndicate is starting to evacuate the moon. But they're not evacuating their people, only the Dreamers and their executives. We're going to be facing heavy resistance when we land,]* Jason warned.

[We can handle it,] Tara answered. *[Everyone max out your rail ammo, prepare for extended op time without resupply.]*

[We'll fill every socket on the hip mounts, everyone stay in your bays,] one of the ground crew called.

[That'll work. Everyone get a full complement even if you're not carrying a rail cannon, that way you're carrying rail ammo for the rigs that are.]

Jason split his time between watching the telemetry and watching the ground crews load up every Titan with clips of rail slugs, attaching them to the hip "belt" of the mecha. There were slots for 20 external clips on a Titan, but usually a rig only carried ten to leave the slot mounts open for other equipment or supplies. Each clip held 20 slugs, so that gave them an extra 400 rounds of ammunition for their rail cannons, on top of the 20 slugs that were already loaded in the rail cannon.

Minutes passed by, and Jason watched the Syndicate fleet over the telemetry Cybi was feeding him. They were jumping out in groups, with the 3,000 ships staying behind pulling behind the moon, getting in the exact center so the stream didn't curl around the planet and engulf them. That put them over the north pole, which was actually the magnetic south pole for the moon, since its magnetic field was flipped similar to Terra's. The stream

was coming in from “below,” from under Andromeda’s rotational plane, and would strike the moon’s southern hemisphere.

Then, Jason heard a curious missive from Kraal. *[Denmother, something strange goes on on the moon,]* he relayed. *[The Syndicate forces there report that the Dreamers have fled their villages. Some are hiding underground, in caves and cellars, while others scatter into forests, spreading themselves out. The units there to evacuate them are having problems finding them.]*

[That is not entirely unexpected, Kraal,] Zaa informed him. *[Keep us informed as to their progress.]*

[As of now, virtually none,] he answered. *[They are having a very hard time collecting up Dreamers in any numbers. Their current projections suggest that they may only evacuate ten thousand before the stream arrives.]*

That was a good sign. The Oracles knew, and they were taking steps to save as many of their people as they could by keeping them on the moon.

Jason watched for nearly half an hour, watching the Syndicate transports and dropships rising up from the surface, holding only those that the Syndicate felt were worth saving...the officers and executives. They were leaving the rest of their people there to die, which were all Benga, and what Jason found a bit odd, all telepaths. Because of the Dreamers, they didn’t allow non-telepaths to serve on that moon. The Board was throwing away hundreds of thousands of Benga telepaths by not evacuating them...but then again, with the Consortium crushed and the Dreamers about to be decimated, Jason figured they concluded that they didn’t need so many telepaths to keep what few Dreamers would be left in line. He checked the countdown clock and saw that there were only three hours left before the stream arrived, and according to the figures he was seeing, the Benga had evacuated quite a few of their executives and officers, but were still having a bear of a time getting Dreamers onto dropships. The Syndicate’s strategy of scattering them out into small villages spread across the entire moon was now working against them, since most Dreamer settlements were only about 50 people. Their teams had to go a long way to get to them, and when they got there, they found that the Dreamers had either fled their villages or had taken refuge underground. They had to use up precious time either

getting them out of their cellars or caves or rounding them up from the forests.

[My Denmother, a change of orders,] Kraal's voice touched him as Cybi relayed it. [Their scientists report that people in underground climate-controlled bunkers will survive the stream, so they will order their people to take shelter. An additional five tactical squadrons are ordered to remain behind to recover survivors once the stream passes. That increases the number of ships remaining behind to 18,000.]

That was more than Navii and Lorna expected, nearly double, but Jason felt that they could take a fleet that size. The IP armor would even the odds, given that 95% of the enemy's weapons would be ineffective against their ships. So long as they were very careful against the super-ships, the only ships carrying weapons dangerous to their fleet, they would win. It would take longer to clear them out, but they'd still win.

And his suspicions were correct. Lorna herself ordered the fleet to stay on mission when the change reached her.

He continued to watch intently as the minutes passed, watching more and more dropships and transports rise up from the surface, and their spy probes showed that the Benga left behind were finally warned about the stream. The soldiers and civilians were ordered to take shelter underground and hold their position until the stream passed, and the atmospheric temperatures came down, when they'd be rescued. He was almost surprised when he realized that there was only one hour until the stream arrived, and that time mark caused the fleet to start preparing to deploy. The *Tempest* changed position within the fleet, grouping up with other Whales and troop transports, part of the ground invasion fleet that would hang back once they jumped in, then advance when the enemy's ships were cleared out and they could launch without resistance. *[One hour,] Tara warned. [Everyone run a level two diagnostic one more time. If anyone has any problems, let's find it now so the techs have time to fix it before we jump. And fucking nobody delink. I want at least a full hour of merge uptime before we head in, so everyone's at 100%.]*

[At least you guys can run to the bathroom if you need to. All we have are the urine tubes,] Kei teased lightly.

[You signed up for this, Kei,] Jason replied.

Over the last hour, Jason watched the feeds and saw that everything seemed to be going their way. The Syndicate wasn't acting like they knew it was a trick, as more and more transports and dropships came up and more ships jumped out, up until about 20 minutes until the stream was going to arrive. It was visible to the Syndicate at that point, a tiny red splotch in the vast distance, and at that point, ships stopped coming up from the surface and the 18,000 ships remaining behind retreated to safety, some 5,000 staying behind the moon, but the remaining moving off to hide behind the gas giant.

That, they did not expect.

But it wasn't his job to worry about that. He was a rigger in this operation, and his part of the mission wasn't going to change. It would be up to Lorna and the CCM command staff to adjust, and he was confident they'd do just that.

[Everyone do one final quick check, we'll be jumping in 20,] Tara called as Jason watched the *Tianne* start to move, getting clear of the fleet so it could jump in first. An escort of 50 frigates moved with it, there to defend the flagship as it dealt with the stream, and one by one, the ships vanished as they cloaked. Jason did a final equipment check and found that all his external weapons were ready to go.

That was it. There was nothing to do now but wait to jump.

The bridge was almost chaotic with activity, but Admiral Palla Karinne sat sedately in her captain's chair, Coma hovering beside her as a hologram, and watched the tactical viewscreen. She had her elbows on the armrests of her chair, her armored fingers steepled in front of her, studying the enemy fleet disposition. Only about a third of it remained at the moon, with the rest of it moving off to take refuge behind the gas giant, a move they felt probably gave their ships more protection. But, in a way, that would make it easier for the CCM. After they cleared out the ships behind the moon, they would then be between the enemy fleet and the moon, allowing them to defend it.

That was why Lorna had altered the jump inbound coordinates to plant the fleet in a position behind the two segments of the enemy fleet, between the moon and the gas giant. Both of them would move to engage the CCM, and that would draw them away from the moon.

“Fifteen minutes to jump!” one of her officers shouted.

“Begin GRAF cannon ignition,” Palla ordered calmly. “Bring it online then put it into jump standby.”

“Aye, Captain, beginning GRAF cannon ignition sequence,” her tactical officer answered. “T minus six minutes until primary couplers are engaged.”

“GRAF systems status?” Palla called.

“Recoil absorption systems online.”

“Engine compensation online.”

“Power distribution network online.”

“Weapons to GRAF standby,” Palla ordered.

“Aye sir, all weapons shifting to standby mode.”

“When we charge the cannon, it will be at full power and maximum dispersion,” she reminded. “Has our destination point changed, navigation?”

“No Sir, calculations haven’t changed. The antimatter stream’s velocity has not changed,” came the reply.

“Keep an eye on it and be ready to recalculate if necessary.”

“Aye, Sir.”

To her left, a holo winked on, showing Lorna’s face. “All systems are ready, General. We’re ready to jump at countdown zero,” Palla reported.

“Orders are unchanged, Captain, but a new fleet arrival point has been selected. Your navigators should be receiving the updated vectors now.”

“Confirmed, Sir, HQ is uploading new nav vectors,” one of her nav officers called.

“Good luck, Captain,” Lorna said, then her holo winked out.

From behind her chair, Admiral Hezivarr of the Verutans stepped up and looked down at her from over her shoulder. He would be the CCM command staff officer that would be deploying the fleet once they engaged, and Palla did not mind at all. He was a little arrogant, but Hezivarr was an outstanding military officer, vastly intelligent and an excellent tactician. Under his command, the fleet would have capable leadership. His only little quirk was that he didn't sit at a station when he was commanding a fleet, he had a tendency to pace around the bridge, the tactical holos moving with him so he could see what was going on. "Is the ship ready, Captain?" he asked.

"The ship is ready, Admiral," she answered. "The GRAF cannon is in its ignition sequence now and should be ready to charge and fire once we jump."

"All systems are at peak efficiency, Admiral. The ship is ready for combat operations," Coma added.

"Very good. Keep me apprised."

"Aye, Admiral."

[Attention all hands,] Coma called over the ship's local biogenic network. [Fourteen minutes to jump. All personnel seal personal armor systems. All personnel, seal personal armor systems.]

Palla reached down under the arm of her chair, pulled out her helmet, then settled it into position, locking it to the neck of her armor. She glanced Hezivarr settling his own helmet on, then he gave her a quick smile through the faceplate and went back to the fleet operations side of the bridge.

"GRAF ignition complete," her tactical officer declared. "Primary couplers are engaged. All systems are on GRAF standby. Setting the GRAF cannon into jump standby mode."

"Be ready to begin charging to full power as soon as we're back in normal space," Palla answered.

"Aye sir, I have the charging sequence ready to start. Dispersion set at maximum, and target vector is already loaded into the targeting computer."

There was nothing to do but wait. Palla watched the holos that showed enemy fleet positions as the stream approached, watched the countdown

clock, watched the GRAF status holo that showed the weapon's status, making sure that it remained active. She saw nothing change from what she expected to see, and everything remained on schedule.

"Three minutes to jump," Palla warned as the countdown clock reached three minutes. "Comm six, ensure all frigate escorts are reporting ready. Tactical, are they in formation?"

"All frigates are in formation, Captain," her tactical officer called.

"Very good. Navigation, we are on schedule. Jump at countdown zero."

"Aye sir, jumping at countdown zero, jump coordinates locked in."

Behind them, Palla saw the fleet moving into position to jump as well. The massive fleet organized into 32 squadrons, each one led by a KMS battleship, with the *Kinai* and the eight command ships at the forefront. They had to jump in first so they could start the firing sequence for their GRAF cannons, and they'd be doing so just before the stream passed by the moon, using the stream cloud as cover to get into position and start charging so they could fire the instant the cannons were at full power. They were going to fire *through* the stream cloud, since the cannon fired pure kinetic energy and thus wouldn't interact with the antimatter, taking advantage of the fact that the enemy would be pinned in by the cloud and also wouldn't be able to detect them. The stream cloud would saturate their short-range sensors as it passed, due to all the energy being released by the cloud as it was eaten away by the star's solar wind.

"Automated weapon status?" she asked, looking to her right, where three members of 3D sat at a console near the comm stations. Palla knew two of them, Bo and Maggie, but didn't know the Jhri that sat between them.

"All units are ready to deploy, Captain," Maggie answered in her twangy voice. "Stellar collectors are ready to fire. They have targets locked already."

"Send those to the command ships so they don't aim at your collector targets," she ordered.

"Yes Sir," she replied.

The countdown went under one minute. *[All hands, prepare to jump. All hands, prepare to jump,]* Coma warned over the network, as Palla looked over her displays and saw that everything was showing ready. “Everyone, execute the plan as soon as we reach the moon in mode one,” Palla called loudly to her bridge crew. “Everyone knows what to do. Let’s show the entire CCM why we are its flagship,” she said proudly.

“Twenty seconds to jump!” her primary navigator called.

She watched the countdown clock tick down, and when it hit zero, the ship jumped out of normal space. Her jack shifted her senses to the sensor mesh in her armor, allowing her to see and hear through her helmet cameras and microphones and feel through her armor’s surface. For an old warhorse like her, it was almost odd to her that she wasn’t in jump restraints while they were in hyperspace. Their jump was only going to be 12 seconds, from their position just outside the galactic rim and into the system, so she barely had time to muse about the marching of technology before the ship returned to normal space. The instant it did, the translight drive engaged, hurtling them towards the moon at 57 light years an hour, allowing them to close the distance from where they jumped in to their destination point 28,000 kathra from the Dreamer’s moon in 4.3 seconds. The forward view was dominated on the left side by the Dreamer’s homeworld when the translight drive disengaged and the ship slowed to a stop, and that view shifted as the ship began to turn.

“GRAF cannon charging sequence initiated!” her tactical officer called before her nav officer could even announce they were back in normal space. “T minus 107 seconds to full power!”

“Moving into firing position, Captain!” her primary navigator called. “Helm will switch to GRAF firing control once we complete our turning maneuver!”

“Stream status?” Palla called, standing up from her chair.

“Velocity unchanged, Sir, it’s right where it’s supposed to be,” her sensor officer answered.

“Maneuver complete. Tactical, you have the helm for GRAF targeting protocol,” the navigator added.

“Adjusting to target coordinates,” the tactical officer called. “Target is locked. Engines holding us in position. GRAF cannon firing in 96 seconds.”

“Sir, enemy comm chatter, they’ve spotted us,” one of her comm officers barked. “They have no orbital assets on this side of the moon. We’re out of range of all their ground assets except ground to space missiles. They’re ordering them to fire on us.”

“Launch the external shockwave pods and position them to defend the stern of the ship,” she ordered. “Order the frigates to get to minimum safe distance along the aft arcs but stay in formation. Tactical, don’t open the outer doors until the last moment,” Palla ordered, stepping down to stand behind her primary navigator. “Be ready to take back helm control as soon as the cannon fires,” she told her.

“Aye, Sir.”

[All hands to jump restraints!] Coma ordered. [GRAF cannon about to fire at full power! All hands to jump restraints immediately!]

Palla backed up to her chair and sat down, then activated the jump restraints. “GRAF systems status?”

“Engine compensators online.”

“Recoil absorption system online.”

“GRAF at 59%, dispersion set to maximum,” her tactical officer answered. “Firing at countdown zero on programmed target vector.”

“Primary, secondary, check in.”

“Primary is ready, Captain, merge is 100%”

“Secondary ready, Sir, merge at 100%.”

“Gestalt systems in GRAF firing mode, all amplifier stacks are active,” Coma added.

“Primary, defend the GRAF barrel when the outer doors open,” she ordered.

“Aye sir, point defense on the GRAF muzzle,” Kaili answered.

“Secondary, watch for incoming missiles from the surface. Destroy any that get through the shockwave pods.”

“Aye Sir, missile defense.”

Palla watched the power level on the GRAF cannon climb, and when it reached its apex, the forward view zoomed in on the approaching antimatter stream, a cloud of boiling fire raging in from flat space. “Target vector verified,” her tactical officer called, as a crosshair blinked on the viewscreen. “Stream cloud vector unchanged, no targeting adjustments necessary. Firing countdown, T minus 21 seconds.”

“Open outer doors,” Palla ordered.

“Point defense, outer doors,” Kaili’s voice came in over the speakers.

[GRAF cannon firing in 20 seconds! All hands, brace for GRAF recoil!]
Coma warned over the network. *[This will be a full power shot! Repeat, this will be a full power shot! Brace for recoil!]*

Palla took hold her armrests as the countdown went under ten seconds, and her tactical officer repeated it aloud. *[BRACE BRACE BRACE!]* Coma warned when the countdown hit two seconds.

“Two! One! FIRE!”

Outside the ship, the GRAF cannon fired, sending not a bar, but an arc of incandescent white energy searing away from the barrel, expanding as it traveled forward, spreading into a cone of pure kinetic energy. The energy continued to rage from the barrel of the weapon for three seconds as the *Tianne* demonstrated the sheer power of a flagship’s GRAF cannon, which was far more powerful than the cannons on the command ships. Almost unimaginable amounts of energy were blasted from the barrel and out towards flat space, expanding as it moved, spreading out in the face of a cloud of boiling, undulating fire that was nearly thirty thousand kathra across. The dispersing cone of pure power spread wider and wider as it traveled thousands of kathra in a matter of seconds, a distance that was carefully calculated. Exactly 19 seconds later, the GRAF energy struck the antimatter cloud, as the blazing energy consumed the boiling fire and blew it back, causing the cloud to curl around the edges of the GRAF blast.

As the blazing light of the GRAF blast faded, it left behind a giant hole in the antimatter cloud, which, if the calculations were correct, was exactly 1,200 kathra wider than the diameter of the moon. Some of the antimatter

gas would flow back into the hole the GRAF shot punched into the stream, but not enough to threaten the moon's inhabitants.

"Report!" Palla barked, looking over at her sensor officer.

"Scanning the cloud," she answered. "The GRAF punched a hole completely through the stream. Diameter is larger than predicted, and large enough for the moon to pass through safely. The cloud will pass around the moon," she predicted, looking over at Palla. "We won't need a follow-up shot, Captain."

"Incoming missile barrage, ETA two minutes!"

"We'll be clear of them before they arrive! Recall shockwave pods! Helm, get us to the rendezvous point in mode one flank as soon as all pods are recovered!"

"Aye sir, setting course 206 mark 64, mode one flank speed, awaiting confirmation of pod recovery before engaging!"

Exactly 23 seconds later, after the last shockwave pod returned to its launch bay, the giant ship lurched forward, accelerating far faster than a ship that size looked able to move, then it absolutely rocketed away when it engaged its translight drive and went into FTL mode. It raced forward, heading straight for the approaching cloud, and then flew directly through the vast hole punched through the center of it, a hole nearly 14,000 kathra across. It turned after clearing the cloud, which was approaching the moon at a dizzying speed of 67,000 kathra an hour and would strike the atmosphere of the moon in four minutes at its current velocity. Palla kept an eye on the probe visuals and saw that the ships behind the moon were redeploying into combat formations as they approached the edge of the their sheltered area rather than staying in the exact center, getting ready to come out from behind the moon and attack the *Tianne* as soon as the cloud passed. The *Tianne* came around, and then turned towards several flashes of light as the *Kinai* and the eight command ships dropped out of mode one FTL and returned to normal space, then they disengaged their drives and slowed to a stop about 100,000 kathra from the moon. The *Tianne* slid into the empty space left for it by the other ships, then slowed to a stop. "Full stop, Sir, helm switching to GRAF firing control!"

“Charge to 78%! Set GRAF cycling for 78%! Tactical, fire at will!” Palla barked.

“Charging to 78% power, aye! GRAF cannon firing in 77 seconds!”

“All weapons remain on GRAF standby! Primary, Secondary, point defense on the GRAF barrel! Fleet status?” she asked, looking over at her sensor officer.

“The fleet has already jumped to local space and is approaching our position at flank speed,” she answered. “ETA is seven minutes. The cloud will keep the enemy pinned behind the moon and gas giant for nine minutes, so they’ll arrive before the enemy can engage us.”

“Very good. Sync GRAF firing control with the other ships so we don’t fire on the same target.” She stood up in front of her chair. “Begin phase two!”

This was *not* supposed to be happening!

Giving a bit of curse, Lieutenant Gen Lun Ba Ru climbed into the cockpit of his Marauder as the technicians hastily disconnected the coolant hoses from the back of the vehicle. Atrovat was supposed to be a cushy assignment, a reward for years of dedicated service! It was never supposed to be *attacked*! The Consortium was pushed to the rim of the galaxy all the way on the far side, and their sensor posts would have seen them trying to jump over here!

He jammed on his helmet while settling into the cockpit, going through the motions of mounting his warmech without even thinking about it. His feet slid into the stirrups of the foot pedals; his hands slid expertly down into the control gauntlets that would let him control the warmech’s arms. A press of a button with his left thumb on the back of the control frame started the warmech’s power plant and master computer, and he didn’t even look at the startup diagnostics flash across his HUD. The pupillary response system enabled, which would allow him to control some of the warmech’s systems with his eyes alone. His fifteen subordinates in the Raiders were mounting their warmechs as his machine reported fully operational, and he took a step out of the anchor frame and picked up his rifle from the stand to his left.

Across the cavernous landing bay of the Main Battleship *Javusa*, there was nothing but a frenzy as other warmech and walker pilots rushed to their mecha, the scramble klaxon still clanging in the background. He accessed the tactical orders on his computer as he waited for the others to get their warmechs up, getting an image of the attacking ship.

He'd never seen anything like it. It was much larger than the usual Consortium ship, some kind of new design. It was long and sleek, roughly triangular in shape, and the video showed it using some kind of weapon he'd never seen before, a weapon that deflected the incoming antimatter stream, saving the moon from destruction.

Not that that mattered to him. He honestly had no idea why those small brown-skinned creatures were so important to the Syndicate. Sure, they were all telepathic, the entire species was, but in his opinion, that just made them more dangerous. He'd sensed their power when he was down on the surface on shore leave. Really, the only reason he could see to keep them around and protect them the way they did was maybe they were training Benga telepaths...not that he'd ever been trained by one of them, but maybe the elite Benga operatives were trained by them to do their secret ops shit. But orders were orders, and orders were that the moon of Atroviet was to be defended as if it were E Chaio, and that not even a single one of them was to be allowed to be removed from the moon's surface without proper authorization, under any circumstance.

What the fuck kind of ship is that? his second in command barked mentally, Ensign Lin Vet Su Mai.

I've never seen it before, Gen answered, watching on his feed as the ship accelerated forward after using that super-weapon, charging towards the hole it made in the antimatter cloud with that weapon it used. *But they've scrambled the entire fleet. Command knows what it is, and they're afraid of it.* He was getting tactical readouts on his display, and he gave a bit of a shocked start. It was from *Galaxy B*? The ship matched the images in the military database of an empire over in Galaxy B that was currently fighting with the expeditionary fleet. Designation: flagship. Empire of origin: Karinne, highly technologically advanced civilization and member of a coalition of empires known as the Confederation, currently at war with the Third Expeditionary Fleet. Unique ship markings identified it as ship

designation *Confederation flagship 1*, so it was a known vessel to Military Intelligence. Heavily armed, its primary weapon what he'd seen, a weapon that fired pure kinetic energy at such magnitude that it was capable of destroying a main battleship in one hit. It was also armed with a veritable arsenal of other weapons, any of which was capable of taking out anything smaller than a main battleship in one salvo. Defensively powerful, possessing some kind of spatial warping system that made shots bend away from the hull without striking it, making it virtually invulnerable if attacked from range. The breakdown stated that the ship had to be attacked inside the range of that spatial warping system, which meant that ships would be ordered to engage it all but bow to bow. Orders: engage at point blank range, minimize damage done, the commanders wanted the ship boarded and captured to gain control over both that kinetic cannon and its unique spatial warping defensive system.

Galaxy B...how the *fuck* did it get over here? It was a five and a half orbit trip to Galaxy B! It seemed impossible that it was seen in Galaxy B just seventeen rotations ago, yet here it was, attacking the Syndicate's most important military stronghold!

It had deflected away the antimatter cloud. This Confederation...they were after those little brown-skinned beings. They had to be. They somehow found out that the Syndicate assigned the highest priority to defending Atroviet, and they were trying to capture it. They might not even know why the little brownskins were so important, because Gen sure as fuck didn't know, but that may not matter. If the Syndicate found them important, then it would be important to the Confederation to take the moon to take control of them.

Move like you're losing pay, you slackers! Gen admonished his squadron. *Anyone not ready when we get the launch order buys the rest of us a round!* He didn't hear any responses, because only two members of his squadron were telepathic, himself and his second in command, Lin. Being a telepath hadn't been a requirement for piloting a warmech for nearly a thousand orbits, but the Syndicate Navy preferred to have as many telepaths as they could get into warmechs for their usefulness in going after Consortium civilian ships and installations, where there were enemies that could be affected by telepathic attack. Because of that, every warmech squadron in the Navy had to have a minimum of two telepaths.

Gen was very nearly assigned to the Third Expeditionary Fleet *because* he was a telepath. From what he knew, every single warmech pilot sent to Galaxy B was telepathic, because several empires over there were known to have a lot of highly skilled telepaths. They didn't want to have a warmech pilot put into a position where they'd be telepathically dominated.

The only thing that saved him from that tour was his seniority, and the number of favors he was owed because of that seniority. Given how good he was, they'd wanted him to deploy, to command a squadron, but he pulled every string he had to get assigned to Atroviet instead, and he'd been here for two orbits after serving three combat tours against the Consortium. After all the fighting he'd done over his 18-orbit career with the Navy, he *earned* spending the last orbits of his service before his pension kicked in kicking back in a cushy assignment.

The rest of the squadron got themselves sorted out, and when the launch order came, all sixteen of them bounced up into the airlock, the lower doors closing. "All warmechs, move out away from the fleet once you launch and await engage order," the control officer called over the radio. "The enemy ship will attack with its main gun, don't get caught in the blast." A vector was loaded to his nav system showing that control wanted them to form up with other squadrons out away from the main battleships, which would be the likely targets.

"They think that single ship is gonna attack *five* tactical fleets?" Lin scoffed over squadron tactical.

"First rule of war, Sergeant, the scout is just the vanguard of the fleet. That ship is just the first one we've seen," Gen answered. "It wouldn't have deflected the antimatter cloud if it wasn't part of a plan. I sure as fuck don't think they saved those little brownskins out of the goodness of their hearts."

"I wanna know how the fuck a ship from *Galaxy B* got over *here*," one of his pilots said.

"That's a question I think all of us want answered," Gen replied. "If we're dealing with a civilization with the technology to travel between galaxies in a matter of rotations...we're fucked," he breathed.

"Amen to that."

“I don’t see how. So what if they can move their ships between galaxies faster than we can. We have millions of ships in our fleet,” one of his greenhorns said arrogantly.

“That’s because you’re thinking with your very small dick, Corporal,” Gen retorted, which caused the five female Benga in his squadron to snicker. “The first question you should be asking yourself is *what else can they do that we think is impossible?*”

His scanners showed that the cloud was about to pass by, but before they saturated his sensors, he saw what he was expecting. More ships suddenly popped up on his long-range sensors, nine of them, virtually appearing in the system and visible almost dead ahead. One of them was identical to the ship that was already here, another ship of the same class, and the other eight were much smaller, yet had the same triangular design. He zoomed in and saw that each of them were opening large doors near their bows, and hidden behind those door was the muzzle of some kind of very large weapon, a shimmering white glow of energy heralding their activation.

The kinetic weapon. All ten were equipped with kinetic cannons! And if they fired nothing but pure kinetic energy like the rundown said, then the energy *had no mass*! No wonder they were preparing to fire even though the antimatter cloud was going to be in the way, it wouldn’t matter!

“Full throttle the instant the airlock opens!” he barked to his squadron. “Get your asses out of the line between those enemy ships and the fleet!”

“Why?” his arrogant greenhorn asked.

“Because they can fire those kinetic weapons *through* the antimatter, you dolt! The shots have no mass, they won’t interact with the antimatter!”

“Holy shit, he’s right,” someone else blurted.

“That’s why he’s the commander,” Lin all but snorted over the radio.

The instant the upper doors opened, the Raiders were screaming out at full throttle, so fast that Gen felt the acceleration through the inertial dampers, getting clear of the six thousand ships that made up the two tactical squadrons that remained at the moon. The rest of the fleet was behind the gas giant, and they couldn’t move until the antimatter cloud

passed by, there was too much risk that stray eddies of the cloud were extending away from the central mass and could hit the fleet if it started for the moon before it passed. And Gen almost felt vindicated when ten titanic white bars of blazing light lanced in through the cloud, blasting it away and forming long tears in the boiling fire as it was pierced by the blasts, and all ten incandescent blasts of kinetic energy sizzled across the void and then struck ten different main battleships. Gen watched with almost disbelief as those shots tore into the main battleships, penetrated their armor, and then pieces of metal and molten slag were flung out into space from the ten individual impacts as the main battleships were violently knocked out of their formations.

By the first coin...the inertial dampers in the main battleships couldn't protect against *that*! He'd bet that at least half the crew in each of the ten ships were just crushed when they were thrown against the bulkheads! He just witnessed hundreds of thousands of Benga dying, in the fluttering of a heartbeat!

"By all that's valuable," Lin said reverently over squadron tactical.

"This isn't the Consortium," one of his pilots said grimly. "I've never seen a weapon like that on a ship that small."

"Get well clear of the fleet," Gen ordered. "They'll be firing on the ships the whole time the cloud's pinning us in. We're nothing but easy targets!" he snarled in frustration.

There was nothing they could do. After they got out to a safe distance, as other warmech squadrons joined them at that safe distance, they could only watch in impotent fury as blast after blast raged in through the cloud, and each one killed hundreds of thousands of Gen's fellow soldiers. Their ships had no defense against that kind of raw firepower, and the enemy ships were firing through the cloud with complete accuracy, striking ships actively trying to evade. Another blast, another ship gone. Another crew dead. And another. And another. And another! He watched as a cruiser turned right into a blast and simply *dissolved* when the incandescent stream of pure energy struck it, turning into a black silhouette inside the beam's light and then melting away in a matter of ticks. The blast wasn't even slowed down by the cruiser, and went on to strike another main battleship dead center despite it executing an evasive turn, burrowing through the

armor and sending an explosion of fire, atmosphere, and shrapnel out into space, driving the ship back with such violence that it no doubt killed the entire crew instantly.

What monsters from hell were this Confederation, to possess a weapon that powerful that would fit on a ship?

Measures passed, and they watched their fellow soldiers die. They watched them die by the tens of thousands every tick. And there was nothing they could do about it.

“One measure until the cloud passes,” Lin said over squadron tactical. “We have to pay them back!”

“Don’t get trigger happy,” Gen warned. “That’ll just get you killed. Be patient, be observant. Find the weakness, then exploit it. *That’s* how you avenge the dead.”

“No! Fucking no! They just got our ship!” Mer gasped.

Gen turned his cameras and saw something that nearly made his blood boil. His ship, the *Javusa*, had been struck by one of the kinetic blasts. It was careening away from the impact, fire and metal flying from the impact area, and then they watched in both rage and horror as the *Javusa* slammed into another main battleship, knocking it out of its vector and no doubt killing thousands aboard the struck vessel. All his telemetry from the ground crew station on the ship was out, and quick calls back to his lead tech were not answered.

The *Javusa* and her crew were gone. His home for the last two orbits, gone. A ground crew he’d personally picked for their skill, gone.

He wasn’t the only one swearing almost uncontrollably over the radio as they watched their ship spin away from the formation out into deep space, an ignominious end for a fine ship and a fine crew. It didn’t go out in a blaze of glory in a battle with the Consortium. It was put in a cage and slaughtered like a helpless *jabat*.

The boiling cloud of fire passed, but it still wasn’t safe to move because the antimatter gas behind the boiling fire was being shielded from the solar wind, and Gen gave another curse when he got a visual on the ten ships... only there weren’t ten ships there anymore. In the measures while their

visual and scanners were blinded by the cloud, an entire *fleet* of enemy ships had managed to arrive, and somehow arrive without long range sensors seeing them coming, and what he was seeing made it clear that this was that Confederation. There were dozens and dozens of different ship types out there, not all the same basic design the way the first ten were, and his scanner counted them at nearly 10,000 vessels. The Syndicate fleet still here outnumbered them, but their fleet was currently split up, and that put the ships still at the moon at a disadvantage. Until the rest of the fleet got back here from the gas giant, they'd be outnumbered more than two to one.

"The cloud will pass in 37 ticks," Gen called, his eyes dancing between his tactical readout and his forward view, keeping an eye on the enemy. Several of the ship designs were in the database, and he read a quick summary of them. Mainly, that they were not to approach within 1,200 kapu of ships designated as Karinne or Imperium due to a Torsion weapon that distorted space around the ship and destroyed missiles and mecha.

Wait. They were ordered to board those kinetic-armed ships, which had some kind of Torsion weapon that would destroy them when they approached? What the fuck was command injecting to give orders that directly conflicted with the tactical database?

It was easy to make out those ships, because they were all in the vanguard of the formations of the fleet. They were lined up like a troop of soldiers in a parade, in neat lines and columns, with the Karinne and Imperium ships in the front of each element. A clever formation, Gen could admit, which maximized the protection of the other ships in the fleet from missile bombardment.

More data from the database. The enemy had diffuser technology. Well...fuck. His unit was equipped with *Torsion rifles*.

"Listen up, we're going in as soon as the cloud passes," Gen ordered. "Don't get anywhere near the ships in the front of those formations. They're equipped with some kind of Torsion field weapon that will tear you apart. Attack the ships in the center and rear, make them break formation and give our main battleships clear targeting vectors for their missiles. I hope by the first coin everyone has full loads of missiles, cause the enemy has diffusers. Our rifles are basically just clubs in this fight. Most of this fight for us is going to be hand to hand."

“Oh, bullshit, can we get one break here?” someone snapped.

“Welcome to war, greenhorn,” Gen replied gratingly, reading the tactical on enemy warmechs and those fighters. “Wait, the enemy warmechs are equipped with external rifles that aren’t Torsion, so do your best to take them from the enemy. We’ll be seeing a mix of warmechs and one-man fighters defending enemy ships. Save your missiles for when you need them, the database says we have the speed to chase down the enemy fighters and warmechs. Primary targets are armed enemy warmechs, people, take their rifles so we have more than just missiles.” Gen slung his Torsion rifle behind his back and reached behind his warmech’s waist, then pulled out what looked like a wide-bladed knife. With a flick of a switch, it extended out to form a lancer’s pike. He took hold of it with both hands and crept forward as he watched the sensor screen showing the antimatter cloud, and behind him, thousands of other warmechs did the same. Gen was too well known and too respected for anyone, not even another squadron commander, to get in front of *him*.

“Now!” he barked, then he surged forward as soon as his scanners showed the last of the antimatter gas passing by. The fleet also surged forward, the destroyers and cruisers rushing to engage the enemy even as those *fucking* ten ships were preparing to fire their kinetic weapons. One of them fired just as they started forward, and he saw dozens of their cruisers and destroyers annihilated when the kinetic blast went right through their formation. Dozens of ships...*dozens*, wiped out in one shot.

One shot.

“Spread out!” Gen ordered. “Don’t give those fucking ships a reason to target us!”

Two more of those mega-blasts ravaged their faster ships as they started forward, until the remaining ships spread out the way Gen ordered his warmechs, presenting a less inviting target. Gen calculated that the ships could fire their weapons about every measure and a half, which would theoretically give them time to close and engage before the weapon recharged. To counter that, the enemy had staggered out their firing rotation, so a ship was firing about every fifteen ticks, so a ship was ready to fire to answer a potential threat. Behind the faster ships, the main battleships were advancing, much more slowly, getting into range so they

could use their main plasma cannons. He saw the enemy launch their warmechs and fighters but didn't allow them to advance to meet the threat.

That meant they had something planned.

"Raiders, listen up, circle wide around the enemy fleet and attack its rear starboard element!" he ordered, changing course. "They're holding their warmechs back, they've got something planned! And I don't wanna be in front of it when they show it to us!"

"Aye Commander," Lin answered.

More squadrons followed the Raiders as they changed course, swinging very wide around the enemy fleet, and Gen saw quickly that his caution was well rewarded. The enemy fleet surged forward in unison, accelerating to high speed, and their fleet answered by launching a barrage of missiles, tens of thousands of them. Then, all hell broke loose within their formations. Hundreds of ships just exploded for seemingly no reason, breaking apart, spinning out of the formations, sending gouts of intense fire and debris erupting out into space. Gen couldn't see what was going on, so he tuned into fleet tactical and found out they were *mines*. Mines, seeded in front of the fleet, and invisible to both sensors and the naked eye! They must have launched them while the cloud was blocking their view and advanced them up to the edge of the antimatter cloud.

No they were quite visible to the naked eye...they were right in front of his squadron!

"Mines!" he screamed, then his reflexes took over. They were small, shockingly small, shaped like little pyramids, and painted black so they were very hard to see with the starless sky behind them. They changed course to hit his warmech as he veered off...some kind of proximity sensor? Instead of trying to get away from them, he instead turned into the minefield, judging that they couldn't change course quite as fast if he closed the distance on them. He found his instincts to be right—again—and weaved and slithered around the mines as they tried to turn into him as he moved directly through the field. Ticks later, he raced past the last of them, then looked through his rearview camera and cursed again.

Not every warmech pilot was as skilled as he was. He watched helplessly as hundreds of explosions lit up the area, made the black-painted

mines much more visible, as fellow warmech pilots died by the dozens every tick. He saw telemetry from three of his own Raiders vanish off his HUD. His sensors blared, then a ghostly pale shadow of light passed right past his left leg, something his sensors registered as a weapon. It was a metal projectile fired from one of the distant ships at extremely high velocity, which would make it *deadly*.

They had non-missile weapons that had that kind of range?

They couldn't circle the fleet if all their ships had that kind of weapon on them, they'd be picked off one by one!

"Change of orders, get inside the enemy formations as fast as you can!" he barked as he punched the throttle. "Avoid the ships in the front ranks!"

"Your sensors caught that too?" Lin asked.

"It's some kind of high velocity mass driver weapon, it'll have unlimited range. We can't circle at range if we're up against that!"

Turning towards the enemy fleet, Gen saw almost all of the other warmechs follow suit...they'd figured out what he'd figured out. He maxed out the throttle, felt himself pressing into his cockpit brace as the acceleration maxed out the inertial dampers, and felt...vulnerable. The Consortium, they didn't have weapons like these. They more or less ignored warmechs in Naval engagements, since their ships always attacked at high speed, and warmechs had trouble keeping up with them. Warmechs were primarily used to attack Consortium installations and fixed positions, things that couldn't run away, and in Naval engagements, warmechs were there to harry and herd Consortium ships, box them in for the line vessels to destroy. This Confederation, they employed fighters and warmechs themselves, and what was more, they considered them enough of a threat for their ships to carry anti-warmech weaponry. In all the orbits he'd fought the Consortium, he had never been fired upon by anything other than missiles when trying to attack a formation of their ships, and warmechs had very good anti-missile systems. But these mass driver weapons, the slugs moved too fast for the AMS to target them and shoot them down. And seeing those ghostly white bars slash in, knowing that if one hit him, he was dead...it was a very new and very disturbing feeling.

That helpless feeling built into rage as his rearview camera bore witness to the decimation of the warmechs squadrons. Caught out in the open, with the minefield behind them to keep them from retreating and only comparative protection was getting inside the enemy formations so they couldn't line up a shot at them without hitting one of their own ships, he watched warmechs torn apart or explode or have gigantic pieces ripped off of them from those high-velocity slugs, hitting with such force that they went right through a Marauder's armor like it wasn't there. He weaved and bobbed and shimmied as he raced towards the enemy, presenting the hardest possible target for them, but many behind him either didn't take evasive action or it did them no good. His rage intensified when the telemetry of another of his own Raiders vanished off his HUD, his cocky greenhorn, a pilot whose name he hadn't really even bothered to learn. One of those slugs went right through the cockpit, and where his head and chest would have been, there was nothing but a gaping hole filling with globules of coolant and frozen bits of blood and flesh.

Four of his own, dead. And he wasn't even close enough to shoot back.

His rage turned to incredulity when the missile barrage reached the enemy fleet, and it *did nothing*. The ships in the front of the columns, they were suddenly surrounded by an aura of shimmering red energy, Torsion energy, and it destroyed most of the missiles fired against them, tearing them apart in the spatial flux. That was the Torsion anti-missile system the tactical database described. The missiles that managed to avoid that went over or under the lead ships, then veered in and slammed into ships behind them, exploding in brilliant flashes of light and energy. But when the ships accelerated past the fire caused by the explosion, the ships struck were undamaged. There was nothing to show for the impacts except scorch marks on the hull. Not a single ship was destroyed. Not one even fell out of formation.

What the *fuck*? Those were Hellstorm missiles, equipped with antimatter warheads! Just one would blow a Consortium main battleship into pieces!

What kind of monsters were these Confederation people?

The enemy formations started to break up, the organized lines and columns breaking into squadrons and spreading out, and with that change of

formation, the enemy's fighters and warmechs were unleashed. The incoming fire ceased as hundreds—thousands of enemy fighters accelerated towards them, but no warmechs. "Here they come!" Gen barked. "Stay at attack speed! Missiles when they're in range!"

"Do we engage, Commander?"

"Only to go through them, our primary objective is the enemy line vessels," he answered. "Land on their hulls and take out their gun batteries. If their armor can stop Hellstorm missiles, our line vessels are gonna need our support. So let's even the scales!"

The instant the enemy fighters were in range, Gen launched a single cluster of missiles, saving the rest for taking out the gun batteries on the enemy ships. The missiles raced ahead of them, were joined by thousands of others fired by the other warmechs, but the enemy fighters didn't even so much as change course. They came right at them, even sped up, and then there was a curtain of fire when the missiles started exploding across the vanguard of the enemy fighter formations. And the fighters came right through the fiery clouds without even slowing down! Scanners showed that very few missiles actually hit the targets, that they were destroyed just before hitting the enemy fighters. They were destroyed by...by what?

He zoomed in. Behind and around the enemy fighters were very small units. Some were discs of some kind, the others were clearly small armed ships, either unmanned or with some extremely tiny pilots in them, which he rather doubted. Drones?

Armed drones?

He could see that each fighter had its own drones, that they moved with the fighter, staying at a specific distance. Drones...the Syndicate had experimented with drones, but they'd been more trouble than they were worth. But this Confederation clearly hadn't had the same issues. Those drones had destroyed most of the incoming missiles, firing on them. And the fighters that were struck, just like the line vessels, had not been destroyed. They hadn't even been slowed down.

He readied his pike as the enemy fighters approached, a cold fear spreading through his stomach. His Raiders were overmatched. The entire fleet was overmatched. They were up against an enemy who was all but

invulnerable to their weapons yet were equipped with weapons that could destroy them. Their fleet outnumbered the enemy by nearly two to one... but that wasn't going to make a difference.

Unless the main fleet turned around and came back, they were going to lose this battle. And even when they did, it would be too late for Gen and the Raiders.

But Gen Lun Ba Ru was not a defeatist. He was a soldier. He had his honor. He would fight with all of his skill and his passion and his cunning, until his number was up and he walked the golden path.

Lieutenant Gen Lun Ba Ru of the Syndicate Warmech Command may lose, but he would never quit.

Things were looking far better than even the command staff anticipated.

Captain Sevi Karinne—she was still getting used to that name—sat easily in the chair on the bridge of her beloved *Arabax*, the most dangerous bulldog in the fleet, watching the tactical feeds on holos around her chair with clinical satisfaction. The ship had cut through the enemy vanguard like it was fluff in an inferno, and the fleet battleships, other escorting tactical battleships, and those most clever Megatron boxes were arrayed behind her ship, giving her the honor of leading them in as they approached the super-ships behind the initial lines. The new IP armor system had stood up to the most dangerous weapon that the smaller ships could employ, those antimatter missiles, and had performed beyond expectations. Not one ship was lost in the missile barrage, mainly because no ship was struck by more than one missile, and the IP systems of their allies could withstand a single missile strike. The Syndicate's targeting algorithms didn't allow that, thinking that one missile would be all it took, and there was no doubt there was some panic on the bridges of the enemy vessels right about now.

Their panic was the CCM's advantage.

"Primary, point defense if you please," she said calmly as they shifted slightly to starboard and the ships broke into elements. The *Ori Ai* slipped into formation behind them, three heavy cruisers and a tactical cruiser to the fleet battleship's flanks, allowing the *Arabax* to deliver him to their first target. Behind them, tactical cruisers, destroyers, and stealthed frigates

formed skirmish lines to defend the boxes as they made their approaches. Heavy cruisers, cruisers, and destroyers were in formation with the only other ships in the CCM that could destroy a super-ship, Imperium command ships and Subrian command ships, each one with a KMS tactical battleship leading it in to be both sword and shield for it. The INS ships did it with plasma torpedoes, while the Subrians used their reflex cannons, exceptionally powerful weapons that even the KMS respected.

The Subrians were the dominant civilization in the Coalition for a reason.

“Aye Captain, point defense. All amplifier stacks are charged and ready,” the Generation assigned to her ship, a young, very cute man named Mori, answered. However, with Alpha Protocols in effect, he would not show his face on a hologram, and he wouldn’t be referred to by name. He would only be called *Primary*, and if she had a second Generation aboard, she would be called *Secondary*.

“Begin long range bombardment. Heavy plasma cannon installations have priority,” she ordered, looking to her left, to her tactical officer. The best damn tactical officer in the KMS, Oma Lolanne, and one of the main reasons why the *Arabax* had the reputation it did.

“All rail batteries opening fire, Sir,” Oma answered. Sevi watched as formations of the Syndicate’s smaller ships advanced towards them, trying to engage them before they got in range. On the surface of their target super-ship, several small explosions heralded the rail cannons hitting their targets, going after the weapons on those ships that posed the greatest threat. She saw several of them destroyed, and then the rail gunners started going after the hundreds and hundreds of smaller hot plasma and ion weapon batteries, ignoring the Torsion batteries.

“Here they come. All particle beam and pulse batteries, get ready. Navigator, keep us firmly between the super-ship and the *Ori Ai*,” she reminded. “Keep the diffuser up. Let our Primary deal with the missiles.”

With the *Arabax* leading the charge, the CCM formations plowed into the opposing Syndicate ships, and within the first ten seconds, the Syndicate was rocked back on its heels. Their missile barrage was destroyed by either Primaries or by shockwave generators, and the few missiles that avoided

those systems did virtually no damage to the ships they did manage to hit, thanks to Teryon shields.

There was a reason KMS ships were leading in the super-ship killers. Teryon hard shields could withstand a strike from an antimatter missile.

They roared through the missiles and set on the Syndicate's smaller vessels like rabid wolves. The plate-sided ships either exploded or were sliced to pieces in windrows as the *Arabax* led the formation through the defenders, all nine of the ship's particle beams firing in a cascading sequence, leaving behind nothing but death and destruction. The Syndicate ships tried to fight back, but their weapons were nullified by the diffusers or absorbed by shields, leaving them virtually helpless on top of being completely vulnerable. The enemy stubbornly kept trying, almost to the point of madness, but the tactical battleships at the vanguard of the formation completely shattered any semblance of order and chain of command in the enemy fleet, leaving the survivors disorganized and vulnerable for the cruisers, destroyers, fleet battleships, and CCM command ships to mop up. The enemy was completely broken from that initial clash, and the staggered survivors of the initial engagement were easy targets for the ships behind as the tactical battleships went right through the enemy and bulled them out of the way like a rampaging Goraga.

That was what bulldogs were designed to do. That was what made them, in Sevi's opinion, the most dangerous ships in the KMS.

"Shields steady, all generators still in the green. Amplifier stacks at full power. IP on standby. All weapons online," Oma called as the ship vibrated slightly as it passed through multiple antimatter explosions, caused when her Primary destroyed a salvo of missiles before they hit the ship. The *Arabax* fired a plasma torpedo from its port dorsal launcher, and the brilliant ball of crushed, hyperphased plasma struck one of the larger Syndicate battleships and blew it in half when the torpedo came in just forward of the protective plate-like wing on the side of the ship and hit the main mass of the ship almost dead amidships. The explosion blew that large protective shield-like protrusion off the ship, which then bounced off the *Abarax's* shields and careened off into deep space. "ETA to target, thirty-two seconds."

"Comm one, send to *Ori Ai* that we're ready to begin the run."

“*Ori Ai* acknowledges,” Comm One answered quickly.

“Navigator, accelerate to attack speed. Release the escorting task force to hold the enemy ships back. Let’s bring the *Ori Ai* in for the kill,” she said confidently, leaning back in her chair and crossing her legs.

The tactical battleships in the formation surged forward with the fleet battleships and CCM command ships close behind as the escorting fleet turned and continued to engage the Syndicate fleet. An absolute curtain of missiles launched from the super-ships, no doubt held back for this, but the tactical battleships accelerated right towards them. Torsion shockwave generators bloomed to life around the tactical battleships just before the missiles reached them, tearing them apart and detonating their antimatter warheads, and it was in that instant that the super-ships opened fire with their Torsion batteries. A wave of red screamed at the ships, but just before they struck the ships, the Torsion bolts were bent aside, turned away in a large enough area to protect the ships behind them as well, as the Generations aboard the tactical battleships did their jobs and protected both their ships and the ships they were escorting. The second volley of Torsion bolts fizzled out well before they reached the ships as they switched back to diffusers, and Sevi could only smile as she imagined the faces of the captains on those ships at that moment.

Navii had been right. The Syndicate command staff had seen KMS and CCM tactics thanks to those quantum computers, but they hadn’t filtered them down to their fleets *over here*. They had not in any way believed that the Confederation could get to Andromeda, could bring the fight to *them*. They hadn’t converted any of their Torsion cannons to ion cannons the way the fleet that attacked them at home had, after coming up against CCM diffusers. They were not trying to circumvent the Generations warping space to defend their ships. They were using the exact same tactics that Sha Ra had used in the first battles of the short war back home, and those were tactics that the CCM knew backwards and forwards and were ready to counter. The Syndicate’s command staff had not warned their captains over here about CCM tactics, so they were at a fatal disadvantage.

The Syndicate fleet here was completely unprepared.

And that was going to be their downfall.

The *Arabax* brought the *Ori Ai* up to the target ship and veered aside, turning hard and accelerating to outrun the impending explosion, and seconds later, the *Ori Ai* scored its first kill in the battle. The target ship went up like a nova when the fleet battleship's Teryon rail cannon pierced the heart of the enemy ship, struck its reactor, and the reactor's energy was released all at once in a cataclysmic fusion explosion. The ship rocked and vibrated when the shockwave nearly overtook them, but the tactical battleship accelerated away from the leading edge of the shockwave and started pulling away. The *Ori Ai* was right behind them, its shields visible as it fended off the energy of the explosion, and it too accelerated away from the wave front.

"Well done. Oma, pick us another target and send it to the *Ori Ai*," Sevi said in a jaunty voice.

"Yes, Sir," Oma replied, smiling behind the transparent faceplate of her helmet.

[*Four o'clock,*] was the only warning that Iyoi received. She banked her fighter as Tikaiya shifted the drones under her control, one of them turning and laying down fire on the enemy mecha that was chasing them. The enemy mecha, the size of a Titan and larger than her fighter, was torn in half by the pulse fire, the large polearm it was trying to use against them spinning off towards the planet, where it would meet a fiery death as it burned up in the atmosphere.

The Ghost Squadron was again teamed up with the War Talons, the most elite fighter squadron in the Alliance, and the 90 fighters were absolutely tearing the shit out of the enemy's mecha units. The 40 Wolf and 50 new Star Talon Alliance fighters weaved and danced between the line vessels, both friend and foe, as the warmechs and fighters squared off in the void between them. The fighters and mecha often had to avoid weapons fire from the fleet ships as they unloaded on each other, but that just made the fight more interesting in Iyoi's opinion. She banked right into a firing position on an enemy mecha, and barely registered the kill as it vanished in a fiery ball as her pulse cannons raked right across its central mass.

[Two on your seven,] Iyoi warned her War Talon wingman, Technical Sergeant Kilravi, one of the Shurai she'd met when they went into the nebula after the Consortium.

[Scissor.]

[Port,] she answered, and the two fighters veered away from each other, then turned back to cross each other's path. The two mecha chasing her wingman split up so each of them chased one fighter, but one of them jerked and spun away when the Shurai rotated his fighter and brought his guns to bear, pounding it with rail cannon fire. Like Wolves, the new Star Talon fighters had omnidirectional engines, easily capable of flying at full speed in one direction while the ship rotated on all three axes to fire.

These Syndicate mecha didn't seem to think that the fighter pilots knew how to fight in zero-G vector-based combat. They seemed to think that just getting behind a fighter was all they had to do to chase it down and try to whack it with one of their pikes, or swords, at least after it used up all its missiles. Since the Wolf and Star Talon fighters were equipped with diffusers, it nullified the Torsion rifles the enemy mecha were carrying. And since they knew what the enemy was doing, it made it fairly easy to counter them.

The mecha chasing Iyoi vanished in a blaze of hellfire when it was struck by a heavy pulse blast from the destroyer *Maira* as they passed under its belly, then the fighter weaved around a shifting white bar of a particle beam as it sliced a Syndicate cruiser apart as Iyoi came up to the ship's bow.

[Mecha cleared from the CAP area,] Iyoi called over STG. *[Let's put some holes in some of those Syndicate line vessels.]*

[All Ghost and War Talon fighters rendezvous on my beacon,] Captain Taggart called.

[Sounds like we're gonna go do something fun,] Tikaiya said impishly from the upper cockpit as Iyoi and her wingman changed course, heading for the boss' fighter.

[Hopefully it will be better than CAP. I almost feel insulted being put on CAP,] the Shurai snorted, which made Iyoi laugh in agreement.

[No argument from me, Kilravi,] Iyoi added.

The 90 fighters quickly gathered, almost unconsciously assembling into four-unit formations as the commanders of the Ghost Squadron and the War Talons flew at the lead with their wingwomen. The two fighter squadrons had some rivalry, since they were the best of their respective militaries, but that rivalry was a friendly one. Over the years since the Battle of Karis and the crushing of the Consortium, the two squadrons had done so many joint exercises that they knew each other personally, and a lot of friendships had formed between the Karinnes and the Shurai. Iyoi had attended Kilravi's lifemating ceremony on Shurania last year. *[The main fleet from the gas giant is about to get here,]* Captain Taggart called over STG. *[We're leading in the fast attackers to greet them. Sweep out enemy mecha and cover the gunboats while they launch their torpedoes.]* Behind them, quite a few formations of corvettes, gunboats, and other fighters from several different empires were assembling, organizing into squadrons, with the corvettes and fighters arrayed around gunboat formations. Those gunboats weren't carrying missiles, they were carrying torpedoes, and they were strong enough to knock out just about anything but one of those fucking moon ships. Those torpedoes hit with the power of a plasma torpedo—they more or less *were* plasma torpedoes, just enclosed in a shell rather than fired from a launcher as pure plasma—one of the new additions to the KMS arsenal. Those torpedoes turned a gunboat into something that could destroy a ship a thousand times its size. KMS destroyers and cruisers formed up behind them with heavy cruisers backing up their lines, and then other CCM ships joined the formation, until a battle line had been formed that would meet the incoming Syndicate reinforcements head on. A line of KMS heavy cruisers slipped up in front of them and took positions in front of each major formation of fast attackers, which would shield them from the inevitable missile barrage with its shockwave generator. That put the fighter formations between two layers of line vessels.

[Go!] the boss ordered when the cruiser shielding them accelerated, and the Ghost Squadron and War Talons accelerated to attack speed, the ships behind them surging forward to catch up. The smaller ships in the enemy fleet accelerated as well, leaving the moon ships behind, no doubt to keep the attackers at range so their big ships could use their heavy plasma

cannons. Too bad for them that the frigates were already on their way over there to blow up those gun batteries.

[Shields full front, IP to full power, Wing 3 and Wing 4 descend to get line of sight and activate your AMS,] Taggart ordered, and Iyoi dipped down under the keel of the cruiser and activated her Anti-Missile System, another new toy invented by 3D and put into service. Two drones launched from under the wings, each one carrying a gatling rail autocannon firing small arms rail slugs that would target and shoot down incoming missiles. Behind them, the line vessels had already opened fire with their rail cannons, the shots sliding expertly between the fast attack craft thanks to Friend or Foe protocols preventing the ships from firing on a vector occupied by a friendly unit, which allowed the fighters to fly confidently through a withering hail of rail fire coming from behind. Ghostly white trails of energy from the non-KMS vessels lanced all around her fighter as they missed it, sometimes just by shakra, and then slammed into the distant enemy. Not a single fast attack craft, drone, or spinner was hit by the rail barrage, which knocked dozens of enemy ships out of their formations and caused dozens more to explode outright. *[Get ready to surf the wave,]* Taggart called when the enemy ships launched a salvo of missiles, thousands of them popping up on her tactical. The fighter's computer quickly identified every missile in her firing vector and prioritized them by distance and velocity, and then the two drones opened fire. Brilliant explosions flared between the two advancing fleets as missiles were struck by small arms rail slugs, a constant stream of small titanium-coated iron slugs blazing across the void, moving at relativistic speed, hitting the missiles and destroying them.

Syndicate missiles didn't have active evasion systems. They didn't try to avoid incoming fire, flying on a straight and predictable course. And that made them easy targets.

The heavy cruisers activated their shockwave generators when the missiles reached them, and Iyoi had the feeling that she was flying through that antimatter cloud as they passed through a cloud of fire and energy as the missile warheads exploded. As soon as they cleared the explosions, the boss barked a single order, *[Attack speed!]*, and the fighters and fast attack craft swung around the heavy cruisers and raced forward. The front line of enemy ships were being pounded by rail slugs, several of them clearly

being knocked out as they lost power or huge gouts of flame erupted from their hulls when a slug hit something important. A wave of enemy mecha came out from behind their line vessels and accelerated to meet them, but many of them bloomed into fiery death blossoms when they were hit by incoming rail fire from both the fighters and the line vessels behind them. Iyoi shot down four enemy mecha as their lines approached one another, like two old fashioned ground armies charging across an open field, and then they met in the middle.

It was instant chaos, but chaos was the Ghost Squadron and War Talon's friend and ally. Iyoi spun away from the blade of a pike and blew up three more enemy mecha behind it, clearing a path for her and her gunboat, while Kilravi shot down five mecha, clearing a lane through the enemy through which they and their gunboat and corvette punched, clearing the wave and having nothing between them and the enemy line vessels but empty space. The fighters behind them engaged the enemy mecha to keep them from turning around and chasing them down, and that gave them all the time they needed. *[Target acquired. Torpedo away!]* the gunboat wizzo barked over STG, and its belly munitions door opened, and a single large torpedo dropped down, then raced ahead on its grav engines. Their formation banked to the side as the torpedo lanced in through enemy defensive fire, as they tried to shoot it down, and then it struck one of the lead enemy battleships, one of their bigger ones. The entire bow of the ship just *vanished* in a cataclysmic hellstorm of crushed metaphased plasma, and then the plasma detonated, blowing nearly half the ship completely away. The stern section of the ship spun away violently, both its shield-like wings tearing free of the hull, debris, fire, atmosphere, and bodies venting from the exploded decks of the dead ship.

[Impressive,] Kilravi noted in his usual understated style as they banked towards the enemy lines. Iyoi almost absently strafed one of their destroyers, white bundles of pulse energy peppering the hull and leaving behind twin lines of explosions. She spun away from a Torsion bolt fired from the destroyer beside it, which nearly hit her targeted ship, and then the heavy guns on the corvette opened up on their target. A giant hole erupted from the hull of the ship, just forward of its protective wing, when the main pulse cannon on the corvette unloaded on it. The gunboat stayed with them, staying in formation, and it fired its forward missile packs at the same ship,

which slammed into the hole blown into the ship by the corvette. The combined firepower of the four fast attack craft doomed the ship, causing its lights to flicker and suddenly veer to port, then it rammed the ship beside it in its formation.

That was their job in this fight, take out the little ships so their line vessels could focus on the big ones.

Things got completely nuts when the CCM ships reached the line, and the formations dissolved into a complete brawl as the two navies slugged it out toe to toe. Iyoi and Kilravi weaved and danced and slipped through the fire being exchanged by the line vessels, and even she could see quickly that things were going their way. The Syndicate ships were being knocked out left and right in quick succession, while the CCM ships were taking the incoming fire, even taking the missiles, and kept coming. The CCM was losing only one line vessel for every ten the destroyed, as the other empires that didn't have carapace armor took too much concentrated fire and it brought down their shields and IP, but even when a friendly ship was knocked out, it wasn't completely destroyed. CCM ships drifted with the destroyed Syndicate ships, their power out and large holes in their hulls, but they were salvageable...and she'd bet that some of them may get back into the fight if the crews inside could get some damage control done.

There was a searing light, and Iyoi glanced at her spinner feed and saw that those 3D toys had finally joined the fray. Dozens and dozens of incandescent beams of concentrated solar radiation, the temperatures of those beams reaching the millions of shuki, blasted into the second echelon of the enemy fleet, the super-ships, as they advanced to get into range to use their big plasma cannons. The laser-like beams vaporized anything they hit, causing the beams to blast deep, deep inside the enemy ships as they vaporized the armor and bulkheads and decks of the ships, as well as everything else, from equipment to bodies. And since the ships were moving and the beams were not, it caused the beams to rake across the surface of the moon ships like some titanic being slicing into them with a cauterizing scalpel, causing almost unimaginable collateral damage. Every ship struck by a collector beam stopped accelerating, was pushed off its vector by the beam, and it did not correct.

Leave it to those devious 3D bastards to invent something that could take out a super-ship with one shot.

The gunboat wasn't done. It fired a second torpedo as they swung around one of the largest of the enemy's battleships, which was nearly the size of the *Tianne*, the torpedo skimming its hull as it passed by and then veered as its true target tried to evade, the destroyer turning away from its path. The torpedo hit it dead in the stern, and the entire ship shattered and exploded, sending fiery debris spinning away in every direction. It then fired a third as they turned to charge down an enemy cruiser, coming right at its bow, and the torpedo struck it right at the very tip of its bow and all but disintegrated the front third of the ship. Iyoi spun away from another enemy mecha as it tried to impale her fighter with a spear, which was blown in half as they passed under it when Tikaiya nailed it with a drone.

[Any luck with the crews?] Iyoi asked her.

[Not yet. They've got some decent mindstrickers,] she answered. *[I've broken a few of the crewmen, but the defenders knock them out before I can get them to do anything. I've had to fend off a few attempts against me as well.]*

[Good luck with that,] Iyoi snorted. Tikaiya was a *damn good* mindstriker. She had to be to be a wizzo in the Ghost Squadron, the boss didn't take anyone that couldn't hack it.

[Gunboats are returning to rearm. All fighters stay in and press,] Taggart ordered as the gunboat and corvette veered away and accelerated back towards the distant KMS command ships, which were still firing their GRAF cannons in a cascading sequence as they pressed the attack against the fleet in orbit around the moon. The enemy super-ships coming at them suddenly changed direction, retreating back towards the gas giant...trying to break the line of sight of the collectors, Iyoi realized. They knew they had no defense against them, and they were sitting ducks where they were, to use a Terran expression. Explosions erupted on the surface of dozens of them when the frigates arrived and then revealed themselves, taking out their heavy plasma cannon installations on the hulls. And that caused the enemy exomechs to suddenly turn and flee, as they recalled their mecha to stop the frigates. *[Let the mecha go, stay on the line vessels,]* the boss ordered Iyoi veered away as a CCM ship, a Haumda destroyer, yanked to

the side with a gaping hole in its port bow venting fire out into space, and she glanced two Haumda crewman blown out through the fire. Both were in armor, and they both started moving almost immediately. Their armor had saved them from frying in the fire or dying to the vacuum, making their way back to the ship on their armor's grav pods as it slowly spun out of the fight.

But still, if it wasn't for IP, that hole in the bow would be more like the entire bow of the ship gone.

The IP worked for her as well. The fighter rocked violently when it was struck by an anti-mecha missile fired from a destroyer, the explosion bringing down the shields. But the IP kicked in a fraction of a second after the shields came down, and the IP absorbed the energy of the blast, saving her fighter from a very bad day. *[That was close!]* Tikaiya blurted. *[IP is still up, but we can't take another hit like that! Stay alert while the matrix recharges!]*

[Shields are on cycle reset,] Iyoi announced. *[The generators are still good. We'll have shields back in about ten seconds. All systems are still up.]*

[Thank Trelle, Demir, and Aris for IP!] Tikaiya proclaimed, and at that moment, Iyoi could not agree more.

[Pull back while your armor recharges, Iyoi,] Kilravi ordered, nosing up to take the lead. She fell in behind him without answering, taking the wing slot, which would give her a little more protection while her defenses reset. Until they did, she was vulnerable.

[It was your turn to take lead anyway,] she joked a little as she turned with him, lining up to attack the destroyer that fired the missile.

It was going better than they expected.

Jason watched the telemetry feeds from two different battles, one at the moon and one at the gas giant, and saw that not only had they caught the Syndicate with their pants down, they were completely unprepared for this battle. The CCM had overwhelmed the fleet at the moon and was mopping up the last of the super-ships, all orbital defense platforms had been destroyed, and corvettes and INS destroyers were sitting in low orbit,

starting to bombard the military ground positions, softening up the defenses for the ground attack. The battle over at the gas giant was a complete scrum at this point, all organized formations had broken down into a chaotic melee as the two fleets intermixed and fired at each other almost dogfighting style, but most of the enemy's smaller ships had been destroyed. The super-ships had pulled into the shadow of the gas giant to break line of sight with the collectors, but they'd done their job in spades. The stellar collectors disabled or destroyed 337 super-ships before the enemy fleet managed to get away from them, and that was a pretty sizable chunk of their fleet.

Seriously. Those collectors might be one of the best things 3D had ever invented. Because of the collectors, the bulk of the enemy fleet was pinned down at the gas giant, and that gave the CCM time to destroy them without them threatening the second phase of the operation.

And the IP armor was making a difference. Ships that would have been obliterated were instead only taking light to moderate damage, and quite a few ships that had been temporarily knocked out of the battle had been repaired enough to either get them out of the warzone or get back into the fight. The IP was outright stopping or vastly reducing a ton of incoming fire, drastically increasing the survivability of CCM vessels.

And thus far, not a single KMS ship had been knocked out of the fight. Their IP was based on carapace armor, and they were all but fucking *invulnerable* to just about everything except the main plasma cannons on the super-ships. And their frigates were ensuring that the enemy wasn't getting the chance to bring those weapons into play. They had damage on 47 ships, mainly the fleet battleships and tactical battleships that spearheaded the assault on the super-ships at the moon, but no damage severe enough to take a ship out of action.

And the boxes were *working*. The enemy had figured out that the boxes were just as dangerous as the fleet battleships, and they were assaulting them with everything they had whenever one landed on the hull of a super-ship. But the box was holding them off thanks to its diffuser and IP armor combo, allowing the mecha and Rockers inside it to set the Megatron unit under the hull, hiding it under the ship's armor like a land mine, and then the box retreated in time to get to safe distance before the Megatron fired. Megatron units were responsible for more super-ship kills than both fleet

battleships and GRAF cannons, because it wasn't just one attacking a super-ship. Boxes swarmed the targets in droves, dozens of boxes landing on every ship, and that spread out the enemy defenders and gave the boxes time to set the device and bug out before the box could be destroyed. The casualty rate on the boxes was more than acceptable compared to how much damage they were doing to the enemy.

He watched as the final super-ship at the moon was destroyed, and outside of some enemy mecha that were flying around, almost in a daze, the space around the moon was at least temporarily secured. Clouds of battle debris were around the moon, in high orbit, and the CCM was recovering ships that were knocked out of the battle, towing them back to where the ten KMS command ships were sitting, along with the bulk of the ground invasion forces. Whales and troop transports were arrayed behind the ten guardian angels, along with nearly a hundred line vessels that would escort them in.

[Phase two is a go. Phase two is a go,] Jason heard over command tactical, the order coming from Lorna herself.

[Buckle up, ladies, we've got a go,] Jason warned over company STG, making sure his Titan was anchored down. Any minute, the Whale would start its run on the moon.

[You heard K1. Everyone make sure you're secured!] Tara called. *[XO, get us ready to head out!]*

Back on Karis, Jason took a deep, cleansing breath, then settled fully back into his merge, making sure he was fully dialed in, that he was completely ready for this. In just a few minutes, Lorna was going to give the order and the ground invasion was going to begin. In just a few minutes, Jason would be doing his part, fulfilling his promise to Aria and to himself, to free the Dreamers from their enslavement. In just a few minutes, Jason Karinne was going to be fighting to save his kin, his people, and he'd be doing it from the front lines, not sitting in Cybi's core chamber. He'd be doing it from the cockpit of a Titan, standing on the front lines and making a difference where he felt he mattered most...standing shoulder to shoulder with his girls and fighting to protect what was good in the world.

He was ready.

[Phase two begin,] Palla's voice called over the tactical biogenic network. *[All ships deploy.]*

This was it. He felt no dread, no fear, no worry...only a terrible resolve.

This was it.

Chapter 5

Kaira, 36 Suraa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 1 February 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Kaira, 36 Suraa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

KMS Tempest, orbiting V2C-01-3E, Andromeda

The Grand Duke Jason Augustus Fox Shaddale Karinne shifted the feet of his Titan within the anchors in his assigned bay as the ship lurched forward, the burst of acceleration overcoming the inertial dampers as the ship began to move. The go signal had just been given, and the Whales and troop transports were starting towards the moon. The transports behind them represented every single member of the Confederation that had devoted assets to this operation, from hulking Druvom to diminutive Makati and Beryans, from lithe and sleek Sha'i-ree and Faey to wide and stout Haumda and Ubutu, from the fierce Verutans to the soft and pudgy Udra, and their equipment ran from Skaa hover tanks to Sha'i-ree speeders to Subrian heavy mecha to Faey Knight exomechs to KMS Titans. On the large troop transports behind them, infantry and armor were quickly loading into jumpers and dropships, preparing for the landing operation, while the 247 Whales in the formation carrying virtually every Titan in the inventory led the procession of ground attack units, who were themselves being escorted in by CCM line vessels and dozens and dozens of fighter and fast attack craft formations.

The Syndicate probably knew they were coming by now, but there wasn't much they could do to prevent the jumpers from reaching the ground. The CCM had decimated most of their ground to space defensive batteries already, knocking out ground batteries and missile launcher platforms, and a complement of INS frigates and light cruisers were sitting in low orbit, pounding the military installations with hot plasma cannons.

They were softening up the ground defenses for the infantry, and that kind of tactic was a blaring bullhorn in any military commander's ears that a surface attack was imminent.

This was it. His countdown clock showed they'd be in position at the moon for launch in 237 seconds. In less than five minutes, he'd be in the atmosphere, executing a controlled descent down to their chosen landing site, a wide open field surrounded by low hills on three sides about 17 kathra from the lone Benga city on the planet. That was the optimal distance, just outside the range of the enemy's walker mechas' heavy guns if they were in the city, allowing them enough distance to set up formidable defenses but close enough for them to reach the edges of the city in six minutes once they deployed.

[You ready, lover?] Symone called over dedicated commune, contacting him directly. She was aboard the Whale *Okari's Gambit*, almost dead in the middle of the Whale formations where the *Tempest* was the fourth Whale in the lead formation, one of the first Whales going in. The *Okari's Gambit* was *her* Whale, because she was no longer an instructor or a squad commander. She was a *company* commander, leading the newly formed 1032nd Army Exomech Company. She'd named her company the Renegades, and so far, she'd done a pretty good job choosing her riggers and establishing her command style. She'd kept her entire squad after they rated on Titans and selected 30 new riggers to incorporate into her company, riggers that would perform best under her rather unique command style. The Renegades were filled with some of the misfits in the Army, a collection of highly skilled riggers that had various discipline or behavioral problems. In other words...Symone's kind of rigger, wild and untamed.

[Keep your mind on the job, baby,] he answered.

[Don't I always?]

[Do you really want me to answer that question?]

There was pure mirth returned to him. *[Probably not,]* she answered impishly. *[And thanks for not having them stick me in rear support.]*

[You're too good of a rigger to stick on a rear base and put on guard duty,] he answered honestly. *[You proved you're front line material to me. Now prove it to everyone else.]*

[Awww,] she returned lovingly.

She blew him a mental kiss and broke the connection when her job got her attention, and that let Jason get back to business. He watched the moon approach on his forward view, given the Storm Riders were getting telemetry feeds from the *Tempest*, then saw the shadow fall over them when the *Tianne* settled into a position directly over the advancing invasion force, escorting them in. And there probably wasn't a rigger or infantry grunt in the fleet that suddenly didn't feel a whole lot safer with *that* bringing them in. The eight command ships were ahead of them, in specific orbits that allowed them to have coverage of the entire moon, and the *Kinai* was sitting well back, keeping line of sight on the last few Syndicate vessels that were trapped at the gas giant. But seconds later, it was clear that the *Kinai* wasn't just sitting there, when an incandescent white bar blasted from the bow as it fired its GRAF cannon, and the shot rampaged towards the gas giant at just slightly slower than the speed of light.

He had time to take stock of the Naval situation. There were only 36 enemy ships still active—35 now—and they were pinned in at the gas giant by the stellar collectors and the CCM. Boxes and fleet battleships were taking them out while the rest of the fleet formed a blockade to prevent any smaller ships from getting past them and to the moon. The enemy military installations on the other moons and planets in the system were all under attack, so they were tied up and unable to assist the forces on the Dreamer homeworld. The main bulk of the enemy fleet had dropped out of hyperspace at the nearest Syndicate populated system, about 47 light years away, and looked ready to turn around and come back, but they had detected the interdictor and the fleet's command was mulling that one over. The interdictor had shifted into logarithmic mode 11 minutes ago, and every second they debated was extra *days* in hyperspace for the fleet. As it stood, it was about a 7-week trip back to the system if they jumped right now, and that figure grew with every passing second.

[*Reserves on the line!*] Tara boomed, bringing Jason back to the here and now. He unlocked the anchors holding down his Titan and stepped out of his bay, then started down the center line. Ground techs swarmed around his mecha using their armor grav pods, giving him and the other reserves a final quick visual inspection, and one landed on the left shoulder of his mecha and knelt down. [*Showing a maintenance door out of alignment by a*

few microns,] he reported, his arms moving quickly and deftly. *[Got it. You're good to go, K1. Give 'em hell.]*

[Will do, Mark,] he answered as he stopped behind Tara's rig and turned to face it. She'd unlocked herself from her anchors and was slinging her gatling disruptor behind her back. By regs, a mecha did the first stage of a controlled descent with its hands empty if at all possible, because friction heating might affect the weapon.

[83 seconds!] Tara warned as the last of the reserves reached their points. *[Open launch doors!]* In front of them, the launch door for Tara's bay opened, showing a starlit sky and a whole lot of debris from the battle. The ship rocked a bit when it hit a larger piece of that debris, and it became visible from the door, spinning away from the Whale. It was a piece of a Syndicate destroyer's protective shield wing, Jason saw, sliced off by a particle beam.

[Ready up here, Jayce. I'm locked in and ready for descent,] Kei reported over intercom.

[Don't throw up, or you're cleaning my cockpit,] he answered, which made her laugh.

[Diffusers up the instant we clear the ionosphere,] Tara ordered. *[No ECDs 'til we hit the ground. One spinner up only when we do hit the ground. All spinner telemetry set to local A. Heavy guns add tactical C to your monitored bands.]* Jason included tactical channel C to his comm, since he was carrying a shoulder-mounted heavy pulse cannon. That qualified as a heavy gun, and he might be called on by the commander leading them from the corvette above the battlefield to fire on a fixed fortified position. There were going to be four of them, three Colonels that would be managing a block of territory and a General, who would have overall command of the entire invasion.

The commanding corvette pulled up close to them, visible out Tara's door, and Jason had to chuckle. It was Jax in the *Ranger*! That made him feel a whole lot better, Jax was one of their best. The fact that she was a General now was a good indication of that. She was the General in command of the invasion.

[I see you in there, K1,] she communed directly.

[Good to see you, Jax. And glad they put you in command of the theatre.]

[You're under my command now,] she warned impishly.

[Don't let that diamond go to your head, woman. I can put bars back on your epaulets,] he warned, which made her laugh in reply.

[You carrying a heavy?]

[Yup, and ready if you need it.]

[Don't miss.]

[Do I ever?]

The Whale shuddered again as they crossed the Lorva Threshold in the moon's gravity field, the intersection of the deeper part of the moon's well with the gas giant's well. That told him that they were very close to orbital insertion, where the Whale would pull into a synchronous orbit over a determined position to launch its Titans so they'd have an optimal vector to reach their landing zone. He reached overhead and took hold of the railing as the Whale vibrated, then Tara turned to face her door. *[C Squad, D Squad, up!]* she ordered. On the deck below, the Titans did as she just did, set themselves to launch. *[A Squad, B Squad, up!]* The Titans in their bay did the same. All of them were watching the launch indicator over each door, and Jason felt a slight shiver of anticipation roll through him...as well as an entirely understandable flutter of trepidation and fear. While his life wasn't at risk here, Kei's life most definitely *was*, and he was responsible for getting her home alive.

The indicator turned green. That was it.

[All squads launch!] Tara commanded, even as she lurched for the door.

Jason followed her out, moving from the artificial gravity of the Whale out into weightless space, then he quickly and efficiently fell into his place in the formation, on the outside right of the first element, holding Squad A and the three reserves attached to it. A fighter fell into position beside him, one of the Lancers from the carrier *Alvari*, and the command corvette *Ranger* took up a position directly behind his element, between Squad A and Squad B. The KBB, Banshees, and Red Warriors were in front of them,

leading them in, and the Ghost Squadron and War Talons were flanking them, forming the point of the spear.

And on his rear cameras, he saw *thousands* of mecha, mech jumpers, and infantry jumpers launch from the troop transports. The first wave was launched, numbering nearly 100,000 infantry and 30,000 mecha and tanks, which would secure their landing zone and engage the enemy, pushing back any counterattack to give the waves behind them a secure and safe staging area. The Titans, Subrian heavy mechs, Skaa hovertanks, and support fast attack craft would be the first units to attack the city, holding the enemy in place and forcing them to defend the city to give the others room and time to get down and get deployed.

But the units that would be on the front lines pushing into the city would be the Titans.

His mecha shuddered and rocked as they entered the atmosphere, slowing down to prevent excessive friction heating as the hull ionized. *[IP up,]* Tara ordered, and the ionization was absorbed by the IP matrix once it came online. Jason held formation as they descended down through the upper ionosphere of the moon, and as soon as they cleared it and reached the troposphere, he activated his diffuser.

And just in time. Several Torsion bolts from batteries the ground attackers had missed lashed up at them as they came into their range, but the diffusers made them completely harmless. The bolts that were on target fizzled out well before reaching the mecha and fast attack craft. Two missiles also came up, very small ones looking to have been fired from an infantry anti-mecha weapon, but one of the Lancers answered that with a barrage of rail fire from an AMS drone, destroying them a good 4,000 shakra below. Two Lancers broke formation and dove towards the ground at high speed, no doubt dispatched to attack the position firing those missiles before they sent up any more.

[A little more exciting than the practice runs,] Kei mused dryly.

[It woulda been way more exciting if the fighters hadn't taken out the fixed missile batteries and heavy ground batteries,] he answered.

It got *way* more exciting as they came in over the coast of the continent, lining up with the isthmus that connected the southern continent with the

Benga city. A whole lot more fire came up at them once they were over a large expanse of dry land, to the point where several squadrons of fighters dove out of the formations behind them to take out batteries and mobile positions that the first wave had missed. Jason watched as a missile hit a Skaa troop jumper, the boxy ship rocking violently, but it recovered and returned to its place in the formation. The jumper's IP armor had taken the hit, and while there was a hole in the side of the transport from the antimatter explosion, it hadn't completely destroyed the jumper. The troops inside had survived, thanks to the IP systems in their personal armor.

He was so going to fucking kiss RDX on the mouth when he got back to Karis. That beautiful Ruu had already saved God knows how many lives with her work on the IP system.

[Get those batteries cleared!] Jax ordered over theatre tactical. *[The jumpers are taking fire!]*

Several more missiles came up and found their targets, and their luck didn't hold out. A Haumda jumper spun out of the formation after a missile strike, the troops inside bailing out using the grav pods in their armor, and an Alliance jumper disintegrated into fiery fragments, several dozen armored bodies tumbling out of the fireball. He watched several jumpers get knocked out, including a Subrian mech jumper, frantically launching its mecha before the jumper hit the ground. Heavy battery Torsion bolts followed them up, bolts too strong for the diffusers in the jumpers and the mecha to repel, and they did damage. He watched with sudden anger when a Titan from the 249th was hit, tearing its left arm off and causing it to plunge towards the ground, fire, sparks, and metaphased plasma spewing from the massive mechanical wound. He saw the mindstriker eject from the upper cockpit, angling down towards the ground on an exopack.

[Get down, get down, get down!] Jax ordered quickly. That caused everyone to change their descent vector, descending much more steeply so they weren't such easy targets, and he saw even more fighters and a squad of Juggernauts and Knights launch from mech jumpers and descend, no doubt to find that heavy gun battery and destroy it.

That was a stark indication to Jason that the ground phase of this operation wasn't going to be anywhere near as easy as the Naval phase had been.

The missiles and heavy Torsion bolts coming up at them trailed off as they neared the ground, losing their firing angles, as they leveled out to glide at low altitude towards their landing zone, and Jason prepared for landing as they came over a low hill and the landing zone came into view. The sun was to his right, just rising, and his HUD display in his field of vision was indicating the landing zone, a wide field with farmland to the west and south and low, gentle forested hills surrounding the flat area on three sides. The towers of the Benga city rose almost dead ahead in his forward view. Tactical highlighted out 37 different positions in the foothills around the plateau where enemy troops were located, including a group of 48 enemy mecha approaching their landing zone at high speed, coming in from the city. It was a scouting party, no doubt, to get a visual on the enemy forces since Kimdori SCM was messing with their sensors.

With a bit of a jar, Jason's mecha hit the ground, and the instant it did, he launched a single spinner, and both pulled his disruptor over his shoulder and deployed the Predator drones. They unfolded from carry configuration and landed on the ground beside him, and the carry frame folded into standby, the spars that had been holding the drones in position raising and extending out almost like the bones of a pair of wings. The flight pods and his heavy plasma cannon prevented them from folding down against the back of the mecha. *[Secure the landing zone!]* Tara barked as the elite exomech units surged ahead. The KBB, Banshees, and Red Warriors would wipe out that advance party of enemy mecha, then go on to attack the city, causing the kind of sweet chaos that only riggers like them could manage. They spread into a defensive circle as more Titans landed in the zone, and more, and then the modular armor sections of the forward command post started to land in their designated places. Combat engineers annealed them together as they landed, quickly forming a very large armored bailey, large enough to hold some 50,000 troops, mecha, and the supplies they'd need to invade the moon. The heavy hard shield and diffuser units arrived, anchored to the ground, and then activated, forming a powerful defensive position, and then the Com-Con and the fixed heavy gun emplacements landed in the rear center of the command post and anchored to ground. It was in that bailey that the infantry and mech jumpers began to land moments later, as well as landing all around the outside of the fixed position, deploying both the infantry that would form the first wave that would attack the Benga city

and the reserve units that would defend the command post so the subsequent waves would have a safe landing zone.

[Clear those jumpers, move move move!] an infantry officer barked as a Skaa jumper landed. *[Get those jumpers cleared so the next ones can land and unload!]* Jason and the rest of the Storm Riders cleared the bailey, bouncing over the wall and landing forward of the troops deploying from jumpers, each of which was protected by a mobile hard shield since they were outside the wall. They were waiting for the official declaration that the landing zone was secured, and then they'd deploy forward behind the elite units, coming up behind them and reinforcing them as they attacked the Benga city. Symone and the Renegades joined them, Symone's rig standing right beside his, holding a gatling disruptor and with two missile packs on her shoulder mounts. *[You and that heavy pulse cannon,]* she teased over rig to rig.

[We all have our favorite toys,] he answered lightly. A line of Skaa hovertanks lined up to the far side of Symone's company, and a company of Subrian heavy mecha formed up directly behind them. Subrian Brawler mecha were larger than most standard CCM mecha, heavily armed and armored, and exceptionally nasty. Given they were Subrian, they were also exceptionally well-engineered and masterfully built, making them very rugged and durable.

[Landing zone secured, advance companies deploy!] Jax barked, and Jason turned and activated his glide drives along with hundreds of other Titans, Predator and Hound drones, Subrian heavy mecha, and Skaa hovertanks as they chased after the elite Titan companies. They passed the smoking wreckage of dozens of enemy mecha as they moved up the flat, wide valley leading to the Benga city, and in the distance, his cameras picked up quite a few explosions and flashes of light. The others were already there, engaging the enemy in the vanguard and causing chaos to allow the rest of them to enter the city with much less resistance.

He felt his heart speed up a little bit as they reached the edge of the city, as several Torsion bolts lanced in from the upper windows of the nearest multistory building, which were nullified by the diffusers in the rigs. He saw a rigger from the 302nd raise her rail cannon and fire on that position,

blowing a giant hole out of the side of the window and no doubt killing whoever just fired at them.

This was it. They were engaging the enemy, and the battle for them had begun in earnest.

[Contact, multiple forward!] Tara barked, bringing her disruptor into firing position. *[Cover four, objective unchanged! Take them out, girls and boys!]* she commanded as she slid to a stop for a stable base and unloaded with her disruptor. Multiple bluish-white lances of energy blazed away from the rotating barrel of her weapon, and they strafed across the floors of the 30-story building directly in front of them. Explosions of glass and stone and metal blasted out from the façade as she walked the fire across the building, aiming at three different enemy positions detected by their sensors. Several missiles screamed in from other buildings, the smaller shoulder-launched ones, but that didn't make them any less dangerous. Jason landed and ran forward with the others, getting between the buildings for the cover and concealment they would provide. He raised his own disruptor and raked fire across the tenth floor of the building across from them when his spinner reported six Benga within with high-energy objects, weapons of some kind, and noted with clinical detachment that their life signs vanished off his scope, neutralizing the threat.

Explosions erupted all around their position and Torsion fire rained down from the upper windows as the line of Titans engaged the defenders in a wide front, and they slowly started pushing in. Large chunks of building were blasted away when the hovertanks and Subrian heavy mecha joined the fight, using their heavy guns to pound giant holes in the city and take out defenders by virtue of destroying everything around them along with them. The streets at the edge of the city were quickly choked with burning debris and thick dust and smoke, turning the cityscape into a haunting visage of dark, toxic fog through which darting shadows moved as mecha and tanks moved from position to position, tracking down and engaging defenders.

In two by two elements, Jason and the other Titans advanced into the city, two units providing cover while the other two advanced, moving from building to building as their spinners searched for enemy positions in the buildings. They also began to encounter infantry on the streets, Benga

wearing combat armor holding covered positions at street corners and within hastily thrown-together covered positions, piling vehicles up to form blinds to hide them from optics. However, the first enemy to try that learned the hard way that their opponents didn't rely on visuals to aim, using the telemetry feeding in from their spinners to locate enemies out of sight and fire on them. After a few hundred Benga infantry were killed while hiding behind vehicles or around corners, they started changing their tactics, going after the spinners. The Titans countered that by deploying their Rover and Spot drones, so they were getting sensor data from both overhead and from ground level, all of it shared among every CCM unit in the fight so everyone knew where to shoot.

There was another battle raging in the city, one that was invisible. The Imperial Marine mindstrikers deployed with the Titans were going after the Benga infantry, and it was everything that Lorna expected. Given the enemy soldiers were stationed on a moon with a population that was fully telepathic, every single one of them were telepaths, and they were very well trained. The Marine mindstrikers riding with the Titans were encountering heavy telepathic resistance as they tried to dominate enemy soldiers and had very little success. They did, however, warn the Dreamers within their range to stay underground, stay sheltered, and hold steady until the fighting ended.

Slowly but inexorably, Jason and the Storm Riders worked their way into the city, the sounds and images of intense battle all around them. Explosions and weapons fire rang endlessly in his microphones, and the bodies of Benga dead were starting to litter the street as they crossed the path of the Red Warriors when they'd made their advance into the city. By now the three elite mecha companies had reached their primary target, the main military base in the center of the city, and no doubt they were sieging it, pinning down the heavy walkers and enemy mecha to keep them from reinforcing the infantry already in the city. A massive explosion shook the ground as a gunboat made a pass over the city, dropping a heavy bomb about four blocks away from them, and then cleared the street when a Star Talon strafed the street, breaking up a concentration of about 50 Benga soldiers. Jason and his cover partner Kenna swung out and fired on the survivors, scattering them further, as the second element in their cover four, Hanni and Jake, held their position. Jason and Kenna darted across the

street and took up a position behind a building, and Hanni and Jake advanced up as they laid down cover fire, keeping the Benga from taking any shots at them.

[Heavy gun deployment, position 143-29,] came a call over tactical C. Jason checked the map and saw that that was only about six blocks from his location.

[Titan K1 answering, 143-29, ETA two minutes,] he answered.
[Target?]

[Four enemy walkers,] came the reply.

[Acknowledged.] He switched to STG. *[I have a deploy order on a heavy gun emplacement six blocks west,]* he told the others.

[Well, let's go break up their party,] Kei answered.

[About time you did something, Kei,] Jason teased.

[These Benga assholes are pretty tough,] she admitted. *[I've only broken three of them so far. At least I've gotten to blow up a lot of stuff with the drones,]* she added lightly.

[Let's get you over there so you can use that big toy, K1,] Jake answered easily. He was a Terran telepath, and was the only Terran in the Storm Riders, at least the only one that wasn't a reservist. But he was a damn good rigger, he had to be for Tara to take him.

It showed Tara's cosmopolitan outlook. She had two Shio, an Urumi, and a Terran in her company.

The four of them changed direction and quickly worked their way towards the target coordinates, crossing paths with cover four squads from three other companies, until they got within a block. Jason sent a Spot drone around the corner to take a look, and sure enough, there they were. Four enemy walker mecha with about 50 infantry and four mecha around them, the walkers setting up to hold a major avenue in the city that led to the city center. The large park in front of them would give them a wide field of fire to hold back an enemy advance, which was why Jax had called in a heavy hitter to take it out. Its location also showed him why she called for a surface gun to do it, because with all that protection, an airborne unit would have a harder time getting a clean shot.

[Pretty dug in position,] he noted to the others. [I'm in range.]

[Hanni, let's swing up one more block and get their attention so K1 can break cover and line up his shot without someone trying to take his head off,] Jake offered.

[Sounds good. That way,] she pointed. [Give us twenty seconds, K1. Take your shot when we draw their fire.]

[Be careful,] he warned as the two Titans darted across the street and then ran parallel to the enemy position. He watched as they got into position, then the two of them took a few steps back and fired their disruptors through the corner of the building, aiming them so they strafed through the infantry and enemy mecha at the rear of the enemy's position. That fire did what it was supposed to do, caused the enemy to turn in their direction, and the moment they did, Jason swung out and set his feet as his heavy pulse cannon rose up and then swung down into firing position. He charged it to full power as the pitons on the backs of his feet swung down and drove into the ground, further anchoring him down against the recoil, then he reached up and put his hand on the barrel of the cannon as it reached full power. It discharged with a deafening *THWOOM*, a mild shockwave of displaced air proceeding a blazing bundle of Teryon energy as it flashed away from the muzzle and rampaged down the street. The bundle hit the closest enemy walker, passed through it and hit the second, and then it exploded in a massive release of energy, blowing the four walkers and quite a few enemy mecha and enemy infantry into pieces, fiery shrapnel and debris that rocketing in every direction away from the blast.

Jason didn't stay there to watch the aftermath. He was retracting his cannon and turning back around the corner of the building, several fiery pieces of twisted metal flashing by and bouncing down the street past them. *[Enemy position 143-29 neutralized,]* he reported over tactical C.

[Confirmed. Good shot, K1,] came the answer.

[Let's get back on mission,] Kenna called. *[We're another two kathra to first objective.]*

The four of them continued to work their way deeper into the city, but their progress was slowed as they ran into more and more resistance, and that resistance was better and better armed. The enemy was getting heavy

weapons in from other locations, and they started encountering enemy mecha, walkers, and infantry armed with mobile rocket launchers, grenades, and mobile heavy gun platforms that they could land, fire, and then lift off again to move to a new position. The fighting got more intense behind them as the CCM infantry first wave entered the city, and all four of them turned to look when an entire skyscraper started leaning to the side and then tumbled from view. Seconds later, the loud thunderclap of its collapse roared over them, and several seconds after that, a near-hurricane force gust of smoke and dust blasted down the boulevard down which they were making their way.

[Things are getting nasty now,] Kenna noted darkly as the four of them held at a major intersection, where two wide avenues intersected. Scopes showed fifteen enemy mecha just a block away, all armed with missiles that made them a viable threat, and they were holding position as they waited for another cover four to reach them so they could engage.

[No, now they're getting nasty,] Jake growled as two enemy walkers came into view about a shakra further down the avenue and started for the enemy's position. *[They're trying to set up a chokepoint.]*

[Too much for a ground attack. Call it in,] Kenna ordered.

[Heavy artillery at location 162-28, fixed position, multiple support mecha, requesting air support,] Jason called over tactical C.

[Inbound, ETA 90 seconds.]

[90 seconds,] he reported to the squad as the second squad joined them, and it was none other than Symone and three of her Renegades. *[Fast mover inbound, hold up,]* Jason warned them.

[Yeah, too much for two squads to tackle,] Symone agreed as she looked over the enemy.

[Hold on, I broke someone!] Kei suddenly barked. *[I got a rigger!]*

[Have him keep their attention so they don't fire on the fighter coming in,] Kenna ordered.

[You bet,] she replied. Down the avenue, they watched as one of the enemy mecha raised its Torsion rifle and started firing on one of the enemy walkers. It managed to blow off one of its legs before the others responded,

one of the enemy mecha physically tackling the dominated rigger's mecha as another grabbed for his Torsion rifle. The three of them struggled for several seconds, until another mecha stepped up and leveled his rifle at the dominated rig, pinned down by the other two, and then fired through the cockpit and killed him.

[Well fuck me, that was cold,] Hanni grunted.

But the distraction did the job. A gunboat and two fighters appeared on their scanners, and the three of them screamed in at high speed, clearly lined up with the enemy position. The gunboat fired a single missile and the three of them pulled up and turned out of sight, and seconds later, the missile impacted right in the center of the enemy position and blew the entire intersection to hell. When the smoke cleared, the entire enemy position was down, all the mecha destroyed and every infantry soldier dead.

[Enemy position 162-28 neutralized,] Jason informed over tactical C.
[Good shot, gunboat.]

[Well, let's not stand here, we aren't at the objective yet,] Symone prompted. *[Let's shadow each other, Storm Riders.]*

[Works for us,] Kenna answered.

They managed to advance another nine blocks, slowly and carefully, the two four mecha units moving together, and then they ran into another formation of enemy mecha. They came in fast from the air, showing up on scanners just 30 seconds before they reached the ground, and they had obviously spotted their eight mecha and moved to intercept. There were 16 of them, outnumbering them two to one, but they had no heavy walker support. Symone was the ranking mecha, and she made the call. *[We engage!]* she commanded as the four Renegades scrambled into cover. *[Make 'em use up their missiles, then take 'em out! Storm 3 and 4, Renegade 3 and 4, cover! Storm 1 and 2, you're with me! C'mon, Maira, let's kick their asses!]* Jason moved with his *amu* as they shifted to another position, splitting into two four mecha teams, then all four of them drew the enemy's attention with their gatling disruptors and drones firing in support. Five of the enemy were torn apart by the hail of fire, then the four of them swung around the corner of the building and ducked down when the missiles came. The missiles were antimatter, and they obliterated the entire

corner of the building with more coming behind them. Jason both raised his shield and activated his melee shield and presented it forward, and it was a good thing he did. All four Titans were blown back by the series of explosions, the telemetry from his disruptor winking out as he was knocked backwards. His Tetryon shield came down and his IP activated when his mecha took a direct hit from one of the last missiles to come in on them, absorbing the energy of the blast as the majority of it was taken by his melee shield. His back hit the ground, and he rolled through with practiced speed as the other team opened fire on the distracted enemy mecha. He regained his feet as five of them charged their position with their hand to hand weapons, and he reacted by trained reflex. He parried a blow from a pike and extended his monomolecular blade, then he plunged it through the chest of the attacking mecha. Sparks and fluid erupted from the hole as he retracted the blade and extended the focus crystal of the tetryon wave cannon built into the hand and forearm housing of his mecha, then fired it at point blank range as the second mecha rushed him. The wave blast blew it backwards and tore the armor and chassis of the mecha to shreds from the chest up, completely blowing off the head construct and right arm. He parried a blow from a large sword-like weapon with his melee shield as the tetryon crystal retracted and his nested forearm pulse cannon extended—it had a fairly long recharge time—but the mecha was blown to the side when Symone reached them, nailing it with her own tetryon wave blast. Kenna dispatched the last of them with her forearm pulse cannons, and the other team wiped out the rest of the formation as they tried to retreat.

[Well, that was exciting,] Symone said darkly as she picked up her disruptor. Jason did the same, and he gave a curse when he saw a gouge ripped out of the housing of the gun, where it had been exposed to the released antimatter that had eaten through the carapace, then the explosion of the impact of matter and antimatter blew back into the internal housing, frying the main collector and barrel rotator array. It was repairable, but not here. And it was his favorite disruptor, so he wasn't about to lose it. He slung it over his back and pulled his rail cannon, pumping the slide and loading it. He checked the telemetry from his heavy pulse cannon and found it was still operational, wasn't even damaged, and ready to be used. *[I'm getting really fucking tired of those antimatter missiles.]*

[Tell me about it, but at least now we know the IP can take one,] Jason agreed. *[You okay up there, Kei?]* he asked over intercom.

[Just fine,] she replied jauntily.

That little encounter set the tone. The advance ground to a halt as a large number of enemy mecha managed to reach the city and reinforce the Benga already here, using their nasty missiles to stall the invasion, even push back the CCM several blocks on different parts of the line. Fast attack craft zipped back and forth over the city as Jason and Symone's units stayed together, as Jax ordered Titan squads to combine into eight or ten man teams for additional support as they were challenged by an ever-increasing number of enemy mecha, and as energy blasts from their walker mecha rained down from their positions on the far side of the city.

Sioa told him that this was gonna be a rough ride, and he was unhappy to see that she was right.

They were stalled long enough for the infantry to reach their forward positions. Jason had to be mindful of where he put his feet as armored CCM infantry advanced up the street and reached their position, where the eight of them were being held in place by a swarm of nearly 30 enemy mecha, in a firing line on the far side of a plaza. They were hidden around the corners of buildings, but spinners and Spot drones were targeting them through the cover. Without his disruptor, Jason was forced to resort to his heavy pulse cannon to fire through cover, using it on a low power setting so he could cycle it fast enough to apply pressure.

Jason slid back into cover as several missiles roared towards them, but they exploded against a hard shield that had advanced up to protect the infantry. Another Titan joined the four of them, and he almost grinned back on Karis when it was none other than Kyva. *[What are you doing all the way back here, woman?]* he asked.

[We took out their main armory and heard that they slipped some shit in behind us,] she replied easily as Zabra, Ebri, and Kima from the KBB joined them as well. *[Jax sent us back here to help you break these assholes.]*

[We can use it,] he told her easily as another missile exploded against the hard shield.

[Just hold here a minute, K1. C'mon girls, let's go clean these little shits out.]

[On your six, boss,] Zabra replied eagerly.

It was four against thirty, and the Syndicate riggers had no chance. Kyva charged right at the center of their lines like a suicidal maniac, coming in at high speed on her glide drives, but their hail of missile and Torsion fire hit nothing but empty air as she seemed to just dance right through all of it. She skidded to a stop with her feet hitting the ground right between two enemy mecha, and she sliced them in pieces in a single elegant sweep of both arms, almost like she was dancing, then she blew up three more with her forearm pulse cannons before the two she slashed even fell out of the way. The Renegades and Storm Riders could only watch along with the infantry around their feet, watch in awe as the most dangerous rigger in the entire CCM unleashed her wrath on the enemy. Kyva was a one woman wrecking machine, taking down ten enemy mecha in a matter of seconds with her monomolecular blades and her forearm pulse cannons, in the center of them yet as untouchable as the sun, and her bold attack fatally confused and distracted the rest of them as the other three members of the KBB joined in. The enemy withered under the assault of the four women, mecha blowing into pieces or falling to the ground in windrows around them, and they finished with flair when Ebri took out the last two enemy mecha as they tried to turn and run.

In barely 31 seconds, four riggers took out thirty opponents, and not a single Titan so much as had a scratch on it.

[Holy fuck,] one of the Shio infantry soldiers by Jason's feet intoned over STG.

[They're not the KBB for nothing, soldier,] Symone answered lightly.
[They are truly Karinne's Baddest Bitches.]

[C'mon, you gawkers, we cleared them out for you. Do your job and advance!] Kyva called, retracting her liquid-smearred monomolecular blade.
[Let's go, girls, there's an enemy counterattack over at 24-213. Let's go put a stop to that bullshit.]

Thanks to the judicious use of the three elite KMS rigger companies, the enemy's push was stalled, and the CCM managed to start advancing again.

Jason found himself mixed in with three different Titan companies as they served in the front line, moving from building to building slowly and carefully as they advanced in the face of constant and heavy missile and Torsion fire. The infantry behind them advanced with the support of a mobile hard shield and heavy diffuser, powerful enough to diffuse heavy emplacement Torsion batteries, relying on the 16 Titans at the vanguard to break up organized mecha resistance and clear out the heavy gun and artillery emplacements that were hastily being set up in front of them. This was exactly the kind of combat he'd expected, the equivalent of house to house fighting from the era of World War II, having to clear out the enemy one intersection, one building at a time. The problem was all the Benga civilians that hadn't evacuated. Most of them had no armor, but they had access to weapons given that there were small armories of hand-held weapons in almost every building, part of the emergency action plans in case the Benga ever had to put down an armed Dreamer insurrection. That put dozens, even hundreds of enemies firing from concealed positions on the upper floors of every building that lined the streets, forcing the CCM to clear out every building one by one. That was what the infantry was doing, allowing the Titans and other mecha to fight on the streets as the enemy's armor and heavy weapons tried to push them back.

Jason's heavy pulse cannon roared, obliterating two enemy walkers as they tried to level their heavy Torsion guns on their position, sending armored Benga soldiers flying to the ground as their heavy mecha exploded behind them. He pulled back around the building and took cover as his heavy pulse cannon retracted back into carry mode. He saw a cargo pod zip down towards them, and he reached up as the bottom of it opened and a new disruptor lowered on a rack. He took the new weapon and set his damaged one on the rack, and it closed and zipped away. Things must be crazy if it took combat logistics that long to get his rearm request processed.

[About time, your heavy gun must be about ready to melt,] Symone noted dryly as she leaned out and fired several blasts from her forearm pulse cannons, then six of them charged across the small plaza holding the smoldering remains of some kind of wire sculpture. Several Benga corpses were scattered around the crater where the walkers had been. Jason surged forward when his proximity warning went off, and a small missile hit the ground just behind him and exploded, sending a massive geyser of fiery dirt

and stone high into the air. *[Mother fucker, how many of these assholes have shoulder-fired antimatter missiles?]* he complained as he whirled and him and three other Titans sprayed a high floor with disruptor fire, blowing out the entire side of the building about nineteen floors up. Someone must have hit the warhead of a missile, because a massive detonation blew out several floors of the building in every direction, and then the 80 story building shuddered and dropped as the supports were blown out. The building started to pancake even as it leaned towards them, and all of them turned and raced away. *[MOVE MOVE MOVE!]* Symone boomed over STG as the mecha, hover tanks, and infantry scattered from the shadow growing over them. Jason and Symone got separated from the others as they scrambled to get away from the building, mainly so they wouldn't get trapped. The armor on the mecha would handle having a building dropped on it, but they'd more or less be pinned down by the weight of all that debris on top of them. They managed to get clear as the ground shook when the crumbling remains of the building collapsed down into the plaza, the top floors of the building slamming into another building and tearing a massive gouge down its stone and glass cladding, exposing the metal support beams beneath that were strong enough to withstand that crushing impact, , but Jason saw on his telemetry that one of his Predators didn't make it clear. It was still operational, it was just pinned under the rubble.

But Kei was having none of that. She used the other drone to dig out the first, having it use its guns to blow out enough debris so the Predator could move, and it managed to wriggle through the stone and metal debris and slide down the pile. It was covered in dust and had several deep gouges in its carapace from the sheer weight that had been crushed down upon it, but the carapace held, and the drone was still operational. It had lost its back-mounted rail cannon, but it still had its internal shoulder pulse cannons and its tail tetrayon wave blaster.

[This shit is getting crazy,] Symone complained as the two of them held at a nearby building, their backs up against it as they both checked their scopes, looking for anything that might shoot at them if they moved.

[Starting to think that maybe nuking the city from orbit mighta been a better idea,] Jason agreed. *[But when Lorna made the battle plan, she expected there to be Dreamers here and she didn't want to kill them. Joke's*

on us, most of those Dreamers were evacuated when the command echelon pulled out.]

[Eh, we're getting tons of prisoners.]

[Benga prisoners are more trouble than they're worth,] he answered sourly as they started moving in the direction of the others, trying to rejoin the unit. The two of them had to scamper forward as Torsion shots pounded into the ground all around them, some of them fizzling out in their diffusion fields, fired from a nest of enemy soldiers in an adjacent building. They didn't care about the Torsion bolts, they cared that those assholes might send down another missile. Symone swung around as her right missile pod rose up over her shoulder and set into firing position, then a single missile went back up along the line of Torsion bolts coming down, blasting out the side of the building. Several burning Benga bodies were ejected from the fireball, raining down to bounce off the stone-paved street. *[Contact left!]* Jason warned as six enemy mecha descended and landed not far away, and he turned and sent a hail of disruptor fire down the street as Symone pulled back to a corner, trying to break their line of sight. The five of them charged ahead even as they fired missiles, and he didn't retreat with her. He suffered a Kyva moment, instead hitting his glide drives and racing forward before the spread-out missiles could converge. He almost twisted around the one missile that was on a direct line with him, making it miss, then he spun on his glide drive and extended both his monomolecular blade and his melee shield. He disengaged the glide drive and landed right in front of the center mecha, no doubt the rigger inside shocked he came through those missiles without getting hit, then he slammed it with a sweeping backhanded blow, hitting the mecha with his melee shield. Arcs of lightning danced around the mecha when it contacted the hard shield energy, as it was lifted up off its feet by the sheer force of the blow and sent flying backwards, then Jason turned and slashed through the chest of the mecha on his right, a line of grayish-blue fluid bursting from the "wound." He parried a blow from one of their big pikes as the other three converged on him, sheared off its right arm with a riposte, then turned and blocked the blow from another pike with his melee shield, arcs of energy flaring from the contact of the blade with the coherent Teryon energy that made up the shield face. The mecha behind him staggered back when a pulse blast went right through the chest and exploded, blowing out the entire back of the mecha and turning the

rigger inside into hamburger, as Symone came charging in to support him. The last of the ones on its feet raised its pike to slash down at the mecha's head, but Kei nailed it with a Predator, several holes blooming in the chest when one of the drones peppered it with pulse fire. It collapsed to its knees, then pitched forward, that grayish blue liquid and green Benga blood spreading in a pool around the mecha.

[You scared the shit out of me, Jayce!] Kei complained over intercom. *[I could fucking read the serial number on that missile when it went by the head!]*

[It worked, didn't it?] he countered.

[Don't take him out, I've got him,] Kei called over STG as Symone raised her arm and aimed her pulse cannon at the prone mecha, laying motionless on its back. *[He's stunned from the impact, his defenses are down.]*

[Good job, Kei. We can tap his tactical comm and see what they're doing.]

[Exactly what I was gonna say,] she replied. *[We gotta get this guy behind our lines and let the Kimdori do their magic.]*

[I'll call it in,] Symone offered.

Command responded to Symone's call moments later. Kei made the rigger tune his comm to their tactical channel, then put him out by putting a mental lock on him that would keep him in a coma. A combat Stick zoomed down, picked up the rig, and carried it back to the command post.

[Awesome, knew there was a reason we were tolerating you Marine bitches,] Symone teased as the Stick vanished behind a smoking building, the ribs of its metal support beams visible along its corner.

[When you want something done right, you call in the Imperial Marines,] Kei replied impishly. *[Now let's get back to the lines so our asses aren't hanging out for everyone to shoot at.]*

[I'm up for that,] Jason agreed.

Building by building, street by street, the battle continued to rage. Jason worked in shifts along the front line hour after hour as they slowly pushed deeper into the city, rotating in and out along with the other Titan

companies as they spearheaded the main push towards the city center, a 300 story tall building of glittering glass at the very center of the city. That was the “capitol” building on the planet, where the Benga held all their governmental offices, and it was the main objective of the invasion. The resistance intensified with every block they advanced, as the Benga pulled in more and more of their civilians and got them into the fight, more and more of them showing up wearing combat armor. But the enemy would not be reinforced, Jason knew, because the CCM had taken all the other military bases in the system. This city was the last unsecured point in the entire system, so the Benga here literally had nowhere to run. They couldn’t retreat, and that was making them fight with intense fervor, since they had very little to lose. The CCM was taking thousands and thousands of prisoners as they pushed in, however, since the civilians weren’t quite as single-minded as the soldiers. The civilians were fighting, shooting at them from the upper floors, but as soon as they were cornered and faced death, they surrendered quickly.

It wasn’t a bloodless fight for them, either. While rotated off the front line, standing behind a mobile armor section brought up to serve as a forward command post and allowing a trio of combat technicians to replace his damaged heavy pulse cannon with a new one, Jason caught up on the overall picture. They’d suffered 3,256 dead and 8,834 injured so far, most of them infantry, proving that not even the forward diffusers and hard shields were complete protection. They’d taken about a third of the city, and what was important, the air units had control of the air space over and around the city on top of cutting off any reinforcements from reaching the city from the military bases elsewhere on the planet that had been taken by CCM forces. The Benga here were fighting with even more fervor, making it clear that they weren’t going to surrender any time soon, even though their backs were against the wall and they were running out of options.

He was getting tired, even from the merge, and Kei was catching a quick nap up in the head cockpit. He hadn’t had a merge that long in quite a while, with all the mental stress that combat put on him, and he was just starting to wear down. But he wasn’t about to delink, he wasn’t about to abandon his girls when they needed him most. No other rigger had the option to just say *fuck it* and stop fighting, so neither would he. He was in this to the end, until the Storm Riders were pulled out and put on an R&R

rotation...and he doubted that was going to happen. They didn't have enough Titans to fill the gaps if companies stood down, so the Titan riggers fighting on the ground were going to be there as long as they were needed.

[Saddle up, we're rotating back in!] Tara barked over STG as her rig started to move. *[We're shifting to 31-384 and we're gonna spearhead an advance towards the enemy capitol building. Everyone get your flight pods up, we're gonna be getting to the FCP by air. This is gonna be a rough ride, kids, so be ready,]* she warned. *[Max out your ammo, fill every pod mount you've got empty. They're gonna throw everything they've got at us.]*

[Marines, I'd better see some fucking effort!] the Major snapped over STG. *[40 of our best, and what have we got to show for it? Sixteen breaks, three disrupted formations, and only one captured enemy rig? You're acting like fucking lazy Army bitches! So get on your fucking game and show the CCM why we are Imperial Marines!]* she finished with a near shout over comm.

Jason ejected his Predator sling frame and ordered a missile pack, which was brought over quickly on a hoverpod. The techs just shifted over and helped mount the missile pack on the cleared pod mount, and Jason tested it once it was locked down and integrated into his system. Once he was sure it worked, he had the two Predators come over to him, and he reached down and picked them up, putting one of them under each arm. He wasn't wasting a pod mount on the carry frame when he could fucking carry the drones himself.

They flew over a burning city for about 14 kathra, flashes of light betraying the fact that they were still flushing out isolated pockets of enemies deep behind their lines, then landed at the forward command post. There were nearly a hundred Titans, Subrian heavy mecha, and Skaa hovertanks already there, but there were also a fuckton of smaller mecha and mobile armor as well. Several companies of IAS Knight mecha were interspersed with Gladiators and Juggernauts and other CCM exomechs, proving that this was going to be a major push. The infantry was going to be clearing the buildings the armor passed, staying well back from the front line, allowing the armor to do its job. This push was going to be almost purely by mecha and armor. Jason found it a bit suspicious that nobody

from the KBB, Banshees, or Red Warriors were there. No doubt Jax had them doing something that only they could pull off.

[Listen up,] Jax called over tactical, her corvette sitting on the ground behind the gathering armor. [We're taking the enemy capitol complex. Exomechs and mobile armor are going to establish a lane that infantry clears all the way up to the capitol complex. Four KMS Titan rigger companies are going to spearhead the initial push, acting as both spearhead and decoy. They're going right up their fucking main boulevard, pulling in their defenders to protect the capitol complex and allowing the other advance teams to push in from other lanes with less opposition.] A job like that? That explained where the KBB and the other elite companies were. [Company and platoon assignments are coming down tactical, so everyone get ready.]

[Maybe this'll break them,] Jason grunted over STG. [They have to know that they're in a no-win situation by now. We've taken every other installation, we have air superiority, we have space superiority. I guess they're holding out thinking that their main fleet is going to come back and bail them out.]

[They're certainly fighting like they think they can win,] Amarae agreed.

Jax called over their company STG, which she could do since she was the tactical theater commander. *[Tara, you're in the wrong assembly area. The Storm Riders are going in with the spearhead.]*

[Holy fuck, seriously?] Jake blurted over STG.

[Seriously,] Jax replied dryly. [Get a fix on Colonel Kyva's beacon and report to her. She'll tell you what's up.]

[Alright then, girls and boys, let's go see what we're doing,] Tara called, a bit jauntily given they'd been deemed good enough to be assigned to assist the KBB.

And it wasn't just the KBB. The entire KBB, both companies of the Red Warriors, and the Banshees were formed up in a large paved plaza, about the only place 160 Titans could assemble without having to knock over buildings. *[About time,] Kyva called as they were patched into the STG channel they'd be using, joining them to up that count to 200 rigs.*

[We were sent to the wrong assembly point,] Tara answered. [Jax said we're supporting you?]

[Support my ass, you're going in with us,] Liira snorted in reply. [We needed one more company for the battle plan, and you and your company are always at the top of that list, Tara. We know your crew is damn good. You can hold your own on this firing line.]

[Damn right,] Kyva agreed. And in that moment, Jason wasn't sure he'd ever felt prouder. [This is gonna be a straight-up charge,] Kyva told them, a graphic of the city appearing on his tactical and showing several lines representing troop movements. [We're gonna draw their attention by coming right down their throats, straight down the main boulevard and in plain view, so we'll be coming in under heavy fire. And I'll tell all you bitches right now, if I lose a single rig before we get to the fence, I'm gonna fuckin' kick your ass personally,] she warned. [This group better not get their asses shot off that easy. Once we reach the fence surrounding their complex, we do what we do best, get inside and completely fuck them up. Take the grounds, hold them, make them bring everything they've got to dig us out. That'll let the armor and infantry advance up with much less resistance. Jamri and Laka are the gate busters. I've got four heavy guns, so I want you four dispersed evenly through the line so you can get into a firing position and take out the ground battery emplacements our air strikes missed,] she said, looking in the direction of Jason's rig. [So don't lose your heavy cannons on the way in, or I'll be pissed. You don't want me to be pissed. They've got six heavy Torsion batteries that can fire on us on our planned entry route that are being backed up by twelve walker mecha carrying heavy mount Torsion cannons, so don't count on your diffusers. They'll have enough firepower to take you out, so don't fucking fall asleep on the push. Marine mindstrickers, this is where it's gonna count. I know these Benga are pretty strong, but you have to be on top of your game for this, cause as much chaos in their ranks as you can. We're counting on you to disrupt their response. Any questions?] When silence greeted her, she nodded. *[We're going in five minutes. Everyone make sure you're geared up.]*

Jason did a quick diagnostic to make sure his rig was still in fighting trim as he ignored the excited chatter across company STG. Just about everyone but Tara was almost giddy over being put in with the *big dogs*, but

Jason wasn't fangirling quite so much. He'd trained under Kyva when he decided to become a rigger, so he was used to being around her in an exercise, having her yell at him for being such an idiot. He finished up his checks and slung his disruptor, then pulled out his rail cannon. They were out of range of both disruptors and pulse cannons from this distance, and he'd need to be able to lay down fire as they came in to make the enemy take cover. About halfway there, though, he'd switch back to his disruptor. That was when he'd be in range with it, and it was the better weapon in a situation like this, where he could lay down absolute curtains of fire on the defenders to make them take cover and keep them pinned down. An enemy hiding behind cover was an enemy not shooting back. *[Ready up there, Kei?]* he asked over intercom.

[I'm ready,] she replied, the intent behind her communication *intense*. She was psyching herself up to do the best mindstriking of her career, and that was a long and illustrious career. She brought up the two Predator drones, having them stand on each side of the rig, standard cover formation when a rig was on the move. His drones weren't the only ones in the formation. Just about everyone had their Hound drones out, and the other rigs controlling Predator drones had theirs ready as well.

That was one reason why KMS mecha were so formidable, be it rig or fighter. An enemy wasn't just facing the rig, he was also facing the rig's *drones*.

[Alright, kids, let's form up,] Kyva barked. *[Spinners up, all spinners and telemetry on Tactical F. STG 1 is command channel for this operation, everyone else on STG 2. Heavy guns also on 3 for firing orders.]* Jason added STG 3 to his comm. *[Sync all telemetry.]* Jason did so, syncing his telemetry feeds with the other three companies, forming a telemetry pool shared by all 200 rigs. What any one rig or rig's ECD would see, all rigs would see. Kyva pulled her rail cannon from over her shoulder and held it in both her rig's hands, then turned around to face the objective. *[Alright, kids, 30 seconds. Glide drives all the way to the gate. Full speed all the way in, and nobody fucking get shot down or I'll be super pissed,]* she ordered. He then heard her contact Jax over command. *[Jax, Kyva. We're going in 25.]*

[Understood. Give 'em hell, Kyva.]

[Yes ma'am,] Kyva responded dashing.

[Drones are in support mode, Jayce,] Kei said. *[I've already found a few weak links in the enemy and I'm working to break them.]*

[Sic 'em, Kei,] he affirmed, taking over the drones. They were well within the range of any Imperial Marine. For that matter, half this city was in the range of an Imperial Marine.

[Go!] Kyva barked once the countdown timed out, and the 200 rigs surged forward on their glide drives. There was no organized formation, no neat lines like in a parade. The rigs came forward at full speed in what looked like a disorganized mob, but the reality was, they were carefully interspersed so they had room to maneuver. And with all their telemetry synced, to the enemy seeing them come in, it was almost a mesmerizing dance of perfect coordination as all the rigs reacted to incoming fire almost simultaneously. Several heavy Torsion bolts sizzled through their lines without hitting anything as the rigs moved in perfect unison to clear the firing vector. These were the best riggers in the KMS, the best riggers in the CCM for that matter, and they reacted with such speed and precision that it looked like a computer was guiding the movements of the entire formation. They danced and weaved through the enemy fire, then they started returning fire, sending withering salvos of rail fire and swarms of Falcon missiles back along those firing vectors. Hastily constructed fortifications exploded all along the fence line as the rigs fired on them with rail slugs and missiles, clearing them out and silencing their guns, reducing the incoming fire. Disruptor fire mixed in with it when they got within range, and that was when things got really ugly for the enemy. A massive cascade of disruptor explosions bloomed across the entire enemy fortified line as the disruptors came into range, wreaking absolute havoc and sending the enemy into complete disarray.

And Jason was right in the middle of them, sliding left and right to avoid heavy Torsion bolts, leaning down just enough to allow a missile to go over his head, and the entire time he was returning fire with his rail cannon.

It took them 27 seconds to cross the three kathra from their staging point to the gate in the large metal fence surrounding the enemy's capitol building, and when Kyva and her gatebusters reached that gate, it was down

in half a heartbeat and the Titans were streaming onto the capitol grounds in an inexorable wave of incoming firepower. Jason entered almost exactly in the middle of the pack, veering right and dropping to the ground and swinging his heavy pulse cannon into a firing position, firing in a target painted by Kyva for a heavy gun to take out, a pair of enemy walker mecha flanking a heavy Torsion ground battery emplacement, all three enemy guns swinging to fire on the breach. Jason's pulse cannon fired before the enemy did, and both mecha and the heavy cannon bloomed into fiery blossoms of destruction. He was too busy to admire his kill, running forward to press the attack, to cause chaos on the grounds and tie up the defenders to allow the second wave of armor and the infantry to advance on the position. His disruptor in hand, he advanced with the others, barely slowing down to fire on enemy mecha and infantry as they tried to hold them back, evading the hail of fire coming in on them from the upper floors of the capitol building, floors that were subjected to retaliatory attack. Explosions pattered up and down the building as the rigs fired Falcon missiles on the windows where enemy units were firing down at them.

In less than a minute, the four Titan companies did their job, and that was cause absolute chaos in the enemy lines. Enemy mecha and infantry were pulling out of positions to deal with the breach, the Titans were taking out heavily fortified positions that would slow or stop the CCM from advancing on the position, and they were steadily whittling down the enemy's heavy guns, their mecha and walkers. The six heavy Torsion batteries were taken out within that first minute, and the enemy's walkers were quickly located, painted, and then destroyed.

When that first minute ended, so did all organized military action within the fence. Things deteriorated into a complete scrum as Titans were everywhere and the enemy was trying to stop them. The grounds became almost like a video game battleground playing a winner take all death match, with Torsion bolts and missiles and disruptor blasts and pulse blasts and rail corkscrew trails flying in almost every direction, as fire came from the sides, came from above. It was insanity, it was chaos, it was complete pandemonium, but this was exactly the kind of warfare that riggers in the KMS trained to manage. And no rigger company in the KMS was more at home in this kind of utter madness than the KBB. The Titans broke into small formations and supported each other as they roamed around the

capitol building grounds to destroy concentrations of enemy soldiers and take out fortified positions.

And the Imperial Marines were making a difference. There were 12 different enemy mecha painted on his HUD as friendlies, holding dominated pilots that the riggers were now unleashing on their former allies. Kei reported almost mechanically that she'd broken another, and a 13th added to it. The Faey were demonstrating why they were so dangerous as the chaos of the fight added more stress on the enemy, distracted them, overwhelmed them with both psychic attacks and physical ones, and that stress wore down their mental defenses and let the Imperial Marines find the cracks in their mental armor. The Imperial Marines were specifically trained for this, to keep their mental defenses rock solid in highly stressful situations, so the enemy mindstrikers found themselves up against telepaths the likes of which they'd never seen before.

Minute after minute, Jason moved through the bloodbath and did his best not to get shot down. He'd never been in a fight like this, not even playing Vanguard, but he was well trained, and he kept his composure, just concentrating on getting to the end of this fight one step at a time. There was no safe place for anyone in this, everyone was just milling around on the grounds trying to do as much damage as possible before they got killed. The KMS was heavily outnumbered, but the balancer was that these 200 rigs were the best they had to offer, avoiding incoming fire that would have shot down lesser riggers and slugging it out toe to toe with a numerically superior force, and that allowed them to fulfill their mission objective of holding the enemy's attention. At one point in the fight he found himself alone, separated from Jake, and the enemy converged on him because of that, having learned quickly that the only Titans they really had a chance against were ones that were alone. He intercepted an enemy missile on his melee shield, feeling the explosion drive his rig back, then he ducked under the swing of an enemy mecha's pike. He extended his pulse cannon and shot it in the midsection even as he spun to avoid the thrust of another pike head, blocking the follow up with his shield, but the enemy mech had its entire top blown to pieces before he could respond, struck by a Falcon missile. He turned and brought his disruptor to bear as he ambled forward, making himself a harder target to hit by moving as he unloaded on a trio of enemy mecha, tearing them to shreds. He walked his fire across a formation

of enemy infantry, mowing them down, being careful to break his firing cycle to allow one of the Red Warriors to rush through his firing arc without being hit, then hitting the trigger again and firing on the two mecha chasing her. The riggers were in constant communication with each other to set up those kinds of things, all of them with half their attention on the telemetry to help out rigs that were being pressed. He joined up with the Red Warrior and acted as her wingman, covering her back as they moved closer and closer to the capitol building, flushing out a large concentration of infantry holed up in the entrance concourse of the building that were firing out on the grounds, his partner putting a single missile right through the front door and blowing the hell out of the entire entry foyer.

He was so focused on the fight that he was honestly surprised when an IAS Knight stormed into his field of vision with two Subrian heavy mechs behind it, shooting down an enemy mecha that had swung out from behind the side of the building and prepared to fire on him and his partner. A trio of Skaa hovertanks roared in behind them, their heavy ion cannons booming as they unloaded on the enemy.

The second wave had arrived!

[Second wave incoming,] Kyva warned over STG. [Watch your fire, friendlies will get thick.]

Jason felt a whole lot of relief, but it by no means meant that this fight was anywhere near over. But what it did mean was that they now had the advantage, that the CCM could organize their armor and fight back using a coherent strategy. Not that utter chaos wasn't a viable strategy, but not every rigger was up to that kind of battle plan.

But the wave did what Jax wanted, and that was quickly push the enemy back, push them away from the capitol building, push them to the far side of the grounds. When the enemy lost their position around the building, was pushed back and away from it, CCM infantry stormed in using glide drives and entered the building, preparing to clear it of enemy infantry floor by floor.

They had them on the ropes. The elite rigger companies had done the job, they'd broken up organized enemy response and allowed the rest of the CCM to gain a foothold on the grounds!

And when that happened, when the CCM infantry entered the grounds and started pouring into the capitol building, something changed. The enemy that had been pushed away from the building started backing up, retreating, and several dozen enemy mecha engaged their grav engines and outright just tried to run. Several dozen infantry in the building fled it using grav exopacks, and a few of them dared to literally jump out the windows, crash to the ground, and then try to flee to the north. They were trying to reorganize, Jason supposed, falling back to gather their wits and then counterattack.

No. Something else was going on.

[Is there a self-destruct device in that building?] Jason asked back to the command center on Karis.

[Yeah, but the Kimdori disabled it. I don't think the enemy knows that,] Myri answered. *[They must have been warned that the building would be blown up if we took it.]*

[That's how it looks from here,] Jason agreed. *[I'll warn Kyva.]*

But Kyva was otherwise engaged. Jason didn't get an answer from her, and when he came around the building to fire on several mecha that were retreating, he saw something he never thought he'd ever see. Kyva was engaged with an enemy mecha, and that mecha didn't just immediately die on the spot. He actually manage to evade a lightning fast slash of a monomolecular blade that would have taken out 99% of the riggers that came up against Kyva—Jason could proudly put himself in the 1% that had survived that move—then retaliated with his pike, slashing at Kyva's left shoulder. She slipped aside with sinuous grace, demonstrating to everyone just how fast and agile a Titan was, then took another swipe the enemy mecha's midsection, which it blocked with the shaft of its pike. The enemy mecha pilot riposted by trying to kick her to knock her off balance and get into a position where he could take her out, but she twisted to the side, the enemy mecha's metal foot just barely missing her Titan's hip and upper leg. *[Holy. Everloving. Fuck,]* he intoned over intercom.

[Who is this guy?] Kei agreed. *[I've never seen anyone last more than two seconds against Kyva.]*

[That's being generous.]

The battle continued to rage on, but the Titans around the building were almost fatally distracted by the spectacle before them, and that was Colonel Kyva Karinne coming up against an enemy she couldn't kill with a casual swing of her mecha's arm. The Benga rigger was skilled and experienced and had reflexes fast enough to put him on even footing with Kyva's blazing speed and absolute precision. Compared to the other Benga riggers Jason had come up against in this operation, this guy was a master of his martial craft, far beyond the other riggers on his side. This guy was the Benga's *Kyva*, and to see him come up against her, it was both mesmerizing and nearly dangerously distracting. Their battle raged near the capitol building as the rigs around them just had to stop and watch, seeing something that none of them ever expected...Kyva Karinne in a protracted fight against an opponent that was nearly as good as she was.

Nearly. Jason snapped out of it and got his mind back on the fact that people were trying to kill him as Kyva put the enemy rig on its heels with an almost dizzying series of moves with her monomolecular blades, pressing him and his pike from both sides at once, and then she reversed and almost seemed to turn her rig inside out as she leaned to avoid a slash of the pike and then struck back, burying the blade on her left arm into the side of the enemy mecha and then yanking it up, shearing through armor and equipment along the mecha's left side, from hip all the way to the chest, the move cutting off the mecha's left arm.. The mecha shuddered and jerked as her attack cut power and datalines, then the rig slumped to the side and crashed to the ground, rolling over on its back. She got over it and drove her second blade into the other side of the mecha, then she twisted and yanked with the blades, tearing off the cockpit doors of the mecha and tossing them aside, exposing the pilot. She then pointed her blade at the pilot, a Benga man from what Jason could see through his helmet faceplate from that angle, almost touching his helmet with the point of her blade. And then, strangely, she retracted her blades, saluted him, and then zipped off to get back into the fight.

[Take that rigger alive,] Jason ordered impulsively over STG. *[If he could stand up against Kyva for that long, he deserves to survive this battle. Hell, I'll give him a medal.]*

[I've got him,] Kei called. *[He's stunned he lost the fight, his defenses are weakened. I'll get him behind our lines.]*

[Good deal. Mark him as a puppet on telemetry so nobody shoots him.]

Jason joined the front line as they pursued the fleeing enemy forces, routing them off the grounds, even chasing them into the northern quadrant of the city as the enemy tried to get away from a building they thought was about to be destroyed by a self-destruct bomb. More and more of them tried to escape, but they were either mowed down or cut off, and to Jason's surprise, they began to *surrender*. They were surrendering one by one at first, then in small units, then any group of enemy infantry that was surrounded and cut off started to surrender. They had to know by now that the self-destruct bomb in the building wasn't going to go off, and since that meant that they weren't about to die, they decided that maybe they wanted to live to see another day. The Benga, Jason had noticed, were not fanatics. They didn't fight to the death like the bugs did, and when it became clear that the only way to survive this was to surrender, the Benga started to surrender. Then, a few moments later, just as Jason reached the northern side of the fence and prepared to cut a hole in it for the infantry, Jax called over command tactical. *[All units cease fire and hold positions. All units cease fire. Enemy commander is offering his surrender.]*

[Well, it's about fucking time,] Kei growled over company STG. *[I was afraid we'd have to kill them to the last man there for a little bit.]*

[I'm surprised they surrendered this fast,] Jason fretted. *[Lorna was predicting that this operation may take days.]*

[I guess when we took their capitol, they realized it was over,] she surmised.

[No, most likely when they found out their bomb was disarmed, they realized that they weren't going to lure us into a position where they could blow us all up,] Tara snorted. *[And the enemy infantry realized that their commanders were going to kill them all just to get us. They used them as bait to lure us into getting close enough for that bomb to wipe out the army. That was when their infantry started to surrender, right about when they found out that their commanders were still going to set off the bomb despite them still being on the grounds. Most soldiers don't like to fight for leaders that just tried to kill them, so they started to surrender. And once the enemy's morale was broken, the enemy commander saw that it was over.]*

[I can't argue with that logic,] Jason agreed.

[You'd better not. I'm your commanding officer,] she shot back, which made half the company laugh.

He ignored that, instead reaching back to the command center again.
[What's the word, Myri?]

[What you heard. Jax is reporting that the enemy commanders are offering to surrender,] she answered. *[But that's a subterfuge of its own. They were ordered to surrender by the Syndicate military command, so they'd have soldiers already on the ground when the fleet returns to the system.]*

[They turned around and came back?]

[Yeah. They sent them back despite the interdicator being up. They're four months from the system, currently out of hyperspace and on a heading back to the moon at their full sublight speed,] she answered. *[They sent back nearly two hundred thousand ships, and you know they have the supplies to cruise in that far at sublight. So, we've got four months to evacuate the moon, K1, before that fleet arrives.]*

[Well, that's a worry for tomorrow,] Jason grunted. *[So the surrender is genuine?]*

[More or less. The reason for it isn't entirely genuine, but in the here and now, the Benga on the ground there are ordered to stop fighting and lay down their arms. So, Jayce, this battle is over,] she answered. *[And fucking great job. You impressed the hell out of a lot of us.]*

[And how much money did you lose, Myri?] he teased.

[Me, none, I placed my bets on you, not against you,] she replied smugly. *[But I think you'll be overjoyed to hear that Shey owes me five hundred credits.]*

[Why that bitch, I'm gonna bust her ass back to private,] Jason barked, and he heard quite a few women laughing in the command center.

He reported back to the company. *[Word from KMS HQ is the surrender is legit,]* he relayed. *[We might be done with combat ops for today.]*

[Thank Trelle,] someone breathed in relief.

[All mecha units pull back to last secure FCP,] Jax called over command. [All mecha units, pull back and hold position at last FCP. Infantry units occupying enemy capitol, continue sweeping the building, all other infantry units return to FCP and await occupational deployment assignments. Combat engineering deploy to forward positions for sweep and disarm assignments. Medical detachments, begin search and rescue operations. Stand down from combat alert. Excellent work, ladies and gentlemen. The moon is now under our control. The battle is won.]

It was over. Months of careful preparation, takirs of training, it had all culminated in a successful operation. They had taken the Syndicate completely by surprise, and over the span of a single day, they had taken the Dreamer's home system. And they did it faster than Lorna had projected.

But, now came the real part of the operation. If Myri was right, they had four months to evacuate the entire Dreamer population off the moon before the Syndicate fleet arrived, a fleet far too large to take on even if they pulled in every ship that every member of the Confederation had available. Four months. He was optimistic about that, however. He was fairly sure that, given the kind of resources the CCM had at its disposal, they could do it. And Cybi had gotten with Kizzik and Makati logistics experts and already drawn up a plan to evacuate the Dreamers in an efficient and expedient manner, so they had a plan in place to do it.

They just had to put it into action.

But, for now, it was over. The battle was over, and they had won. And that was a reason to take a moment and just revel in the relief that he had gotten through it without getting shot down, and what was far more important, that *Kei* had survived the battle. That woman had put her life in his hands, and he had honored that immense act of trust and got her to the other side of the bridge well and whole.

In the scheme of things, that mattered to him nearly as much as the victory.

Chapter 6

Chiira, 1 Miraa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 2 February 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Chiira, 1 Miraa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

KMS Kinai, orbiting Prakka 21-C, Andromeda

He hadn't slept like that in a long time.

Still feeling a bit groggy, Jason stepped out of the hatch of a Marine corvette with his guards and came down the steps in the cavernous starboard main landing bay, which was filled with CCM rigs and fighters that were all undergoing repairs. He was in his armor, bearing the full Phoenix emblem rather than the house crest on the chest, to identify him to the Dreamers he planned to meet in a few hours. The CCM was still in cleanup operations after the battle, and the KMS was doing its part by hosting their allies on their command-class ships to give them room and access to materials to effect repairs on their damaged equipment. Everything was being watched carefully by the ship's Marines and Tarks, as well as Cori herself, to make sure no Karinne technology *accidentally* found its way into a repaired CCM unit, but the CCM maintenance crews were used to that kind of scrutiny by now.

It had been 15 hours since the end of combat operations, and Jason had slept for most of it. The extended merge and all the mental stress had all but knocked him out once the merge was over, to the point where Jyslin had flown him home from the Lake and had to put him in bed like he was a toddler. Even after all that sleep, at that moment he felt he could find the nearest available bunk and sleep for another 12 hours.

When he woke up, he caught up as he came out to personally inspect things, which would end in a personal visit to the Dreamer homeworld to

meet a few of the Oracles. The KMS was already hard at work to warn the Dreamers what was going on and get them ready to be evacuated, thousands of teams spreading across the moon to organize things, all of it to be overseen by Jrz'kii. This kind of large-scale short timetable operation, he was damn well going to have a Kizzik running it. The CCM had completely swept out all hostiles in the entire Dreamer system, and now they were busy securing the Syndicate military installations and going over the equipment, supplies, and intelligence they'd captured in the attack. They also had quite a few Benga prisoners to deal with, but they had a plan in place for that. Those Benga would be held in a series of camps on the moon, until a large island in the tropical belt of the moon was evacuated of all Dreamers. When it was cleared, the Benga would be moved there and left to their own devices until their fleet arrived. The island had no advanced technology on it, so they didn't have to worry about the Benga organizing an armed rebellion. Just as they were doing with the prisoners they took from the fleet that invaded the Milky Way, the easiest way to deal with them was to simply drop them somewhere harmless and leave them alone.

Cori manifested a hologram at the base of the stairs as he reached them, then nodded. *"Captain Haema sends her apologies, but she's too busy to meet you,"* she intoned.

"I didn't expect her to," he replied as Aya and his guards came down behind him, spreading into a loose semicircle around and behind him. "How long 'til I can go to the moon?"

"Three hours," she answered. *"The Stargate should finish linking operations in three hours. Besides, Captain Aya demanded a suitable task force to take you, and the ships won't be available until then."*

He gave Aya a stern look, one she returned adamantly. *This is a war zone, Jason. You will be in a task force.*

"Bully," he accused, glancing back at her. "Will the Dreamer Oracles be gathered to meet me?"

"By then, yes," she answered. *"They're currently locating them and bringing them in."*

"Good deal. Is Zaa still on the ship?"

“She is. She’s on the bridge with several members of the Council, overseeing the operation. The entire Council is here. Other members are aboard the Tianne, and more are on the surface.”

“Who’s on your ship?”

“Zaa, Dahnai, Kreel, Krirara, Jokik, Sk’Vrae, Shevatt, Holikk, Enva, Voss, Shakizarr, Grayhawk, Grran, Ethikk, and Magran,” she answered. “The entire council is in the system, spread out among the forward bases and the two flagships.”

“Good, rulers I can deal with,” he noted. “But I don’t really plan on spending the time waiting standing around on the bridge. I’d much rather be right here,” he said, looking around the landing bay. He stepped past Cori and approached the closest maintenance team, working to repair damage to a Verutan fighter. It was four females and three males on the team, all wearing maintenance coveralls, excising the damaged armor from a missile strike on the port ventral section of the fighter’s main body, preparing to replace it with a new armor section.

And that was how he spent most of the three hours, moving from maintenance team to maintenance team, disrupting repair operations a little bit as he visited with the techs from several CCM militaries as they worked to repair their damaged mecha, chatting with them and more or less working the room as he tended to do. And virtually every one of them were quite happy to talk to him, flattered that he would give them attention, further cementing Jason’s unique status among the rulers that made up the Confederation as one of the most liked by the militaries that comprised the CCM. Virtually everyone in the CCM knew that he was *one of them*, he was a ruler that also happened to be a Titan rigger, and he had fought shoulder to shoulder with them in the operation to take the Dreamer homeworld, and they gave him tremendous respect because of it. He chatted with the maintenance teams, and traded stories with the pilots and riggers who were there to assist and oversee the repairs to their mecha.

That probably worried a few of the rulers on the council a little bit, that Jason was nearly as popular as they were with their own militaries. He was an outside force that their military personnel respected.

When the call came that he was going to board the battleship taking him to the Dreamer homeworld, he was sitting on a crawler with a Verutan and a Jhri, both fighter pilots, listening to them describe the naval battle he hadn't been part of from their point of view. The Verutan female was quite demonstrative, using her hands to depict attack angles as she got into several dogfights with Syndicate mecha, while the Jhri described the savage battle that broke out with the main fleet when it moved to reinforce the fleet that had hidden behind the moon, describing how it was a total madhouse as the CCM Navy met it head on.

"Your Grace, your corvette is ready to depart," Cori called over the landing bay intercom.

"Guess that's my ride. You two take it easy," he said, standing up.

"Good journey, your Grace," the Verutan female said. They both stood up and saluted him, and he returned it with a smile before he turned and headed for the KMS corvette that was in the air and turning around, then set back on the deck and opened its hatch. He was a bit surprised to see Jax poke her head out of the hatch, and he realized that this wasn't the *Aruka*, the corvette that brought him in, it was the *Ranger*. It was Jax's command corvette. *Jax, where's Colonel Medra?*

Think I'm gonna let a Colonel ferry you around, Jayce? she retorted, almost indignantly. *I pulled rank and booted her ass.*

She's gonna be pissed.

When she gets her own diamond, I'll care, she replied flippantly, which made him laugh.

Good God, woman, that diamond has gone to your head. I should bust you back to Colonel just to take the air out of you.

After I was so nice to you to let you take part in my operation, you're gonna demote me? Good luck getting a combat op ever again, she grinned at him as he started up the stairs.

Your dick isn't big enough to get into a measuring contest with me, Jax.

She burst out laughing. *But I have quite a selection of strap-ons that will put you to shame,* she winked.

I did not need to know that. Now get me over to the Ori Ai before I find out way more about you than I ever wanted to know.

Because all the command ships were busy, Jason was going to travel to the Dreamer's moon in the next best thing, a fleet battleship. And the *Ori Ai* had established itself as the best of the ship class, which had further soothed Marayi from the whole Ghost Squadron incident. Marayi was their best fleet battleship captain, and she had the best crew with the most experience with the ship class. And when paired with the *Arabax*, the tandem was a wrecking ball that had struck absolute terror in the Syndicate Navy.

And in the landing bay was the other visitor to the Dreamer homeworld, the one that could *call* it her homeworld. Aria looked quite excited as she stood in the landing bay beside Marayi and with four Imperial Guard arrayed behind her, in her brand new suit of armor—which had to be, given she outgrew armor in about two takirs—and looking both excited and nervous. She was the only member of the family that Aya would allow to come with the moon being dangerously unsecure, a fact which had caused a good six of his kids to very nearly have tantrums, Rann included. Even Jyslin was a bit mad at Aya right now, because not even *she* was allowed to come. Jason and Aria were the only members of the Ducal family given this privilege, and each for very important reasons. Jason needed to go in person to help secure the cooperation of the Dreamers, due to his status as a near-religious figure in Dreamer culture, and Aria was going to see her people. It was her right as a Dreamer, and Jason was not going to take it away from her. He came down the steps and leaned down to give her a hug. *You about ready to go see your home, Aria?* he asked her.

It's not my home anymore. Karis is my home. But I do want to see it, she answered.

Well, I'm glad to hear at least part of that, he smiled down at her, then looked to Marayi. *We about ready to go?*

The last of the ships in the task force are assembling now, Jason, she answered. *The Stargate to the moon is linked and ready, and it looks like the operation has started in earnest. A few thousand freighters just came through the Terra Stargate, and they're starting to organize into formations.*

I told Jrz'kii to get things moving the minute the Stargate was linked, he nodded. We're on a timetable here. I want the Dreamers off the moon before the Syndicate fleet arrives.

We could stop that fleet, Jason.

I know, but I don't want to. I want them to get there and see the moon deserted, Marayi. I want them to know we took the Dreamers. Besides, remember the ultimate objective here, to secure a binding peace agreement with the Syndicate. Wiping out their fleet wouldn't go over very well when we finally get them to the bargaining table.

The other argument there is they'll be more amenable to a lasting peace if they know we can wipe out their Navy, she countered.

I know, and that's the position of quite a few of the council. But I'm trying to avoid a protracted war here. The fleet's gonna be more or less harmless, especially after they get to the homeworld and find we've put up another layer of interdiction behind them, and it'll take them two years to get out of it. Or maybe twenty years, if we just keep moving the interdictors. Basically, that fleet is fucked, Marayi, he sent with malice in his thought.

You know, that could be a potent threat to use against the Syndicate. Interdicting their most important systems to blockade them.

Why do you think I'm having them mass produce interdictors? he challenged with a smile.

Always one step ahead. That's why you're the Grand Duke, she winked.

Someone's gotta keep you silly Faey in line, he replied cheekily, poking her in her breastplate with a finger. Now be something other than silly and take us to the bridge so Aria can see it. She's never been on a fleet battleship before.

Marayi did push on his shoulder in response to being called silly, then looked down at Aria with a smile. Well, we'll have to fix that right now! A fleet battleship bridge is quite a sight, Duchess Aria. Would you like to sit in my chair and get us on our way?

That would be awesome! she replied eagerly.

Oh, no, Jason sent in annoyance when a dropship came in through the airskin shield, which was Dahnai's personal dropship, the largest one she had, nearly the size of a corvette. It landed beside the *Ranger*, and when the hatch opened, Dahnai almost stormed out of it. And she wasn't alone. Zaa was behind her, and he saw that all the rulers that had been on the *Kinai* were on the ship as well.

I knew you'd try to sneak off, baby, she accused as she came down the steps, wearing a suit of Crusader armor, a suit with a tactical gestalt in it.

Sneak off? This was a planned trip, he protested.

The sneaking off part is trying to leave us behind, she retorted. *I have a title from the Dreamers, too. I'm the Valkyrie. So why shouldn't I go see the Oracles?*

He gave her a tight look as the other rulers came down the steps behind her, Jokik and Shevatt having problems squeezing through the hatch, followed by a retinue of Imperial Guard. And it hit him again how *trusting* those rulers were, to leave their own guards behind and allow the Imperial Guard to see to their safety. Then again, most of the council were mightily impressed with the Imperial Guard, both for their skill and their integrity and discipline.

"Hello, baby girl!" Dahnai said brightly, leaning down and kissing Aria on the cheek. "Jason taking you to see where you came from?"

She nodded, looking at the huge Ubutu ruler, Jokik, with a bit of nervousness, then giggled a bit when he hunched down and used a massive finger to flick her nose very gently, using his clawtip. "Aria, this is High Lord Jokik Bor, leader of the Ubutu," Jason introduced.

"You're really big," she blurted, looking up at him.

"All Ubutu are big, little cub. It's kind of our thing," he smiled down at her, speaking Faey for her benefit. "But there's no reason for you to be so close to the ground!" He reached down and picked her up easily, then set her on his shoulder. "There, that's more proper!" he declared, keeping a steadying hand on her so she didn't slip off. "A lady of high station should have a high perch!"

“Ubutu are just big softies, Aria,” Kreel said lightly. “All whiskers, no teeth.”

“Watch it, morsel,” Jokik shot back at him, which made him grin impudently.

“Can you really breathe fire?” Aria asked, remembering some of the things Jason had told her.

“Of course I can, little lady,” he chuckled. “But I’m not going to demonstrate here. I’ll set off the landing bay’s fire sensors, and Captain Marayi would probably scold me.”

“That’s really neat.”

“We think so too,” he said, looking at her out of the corner of his eye and giving her a toothy grin.

“Yeah, like the rest of us can really compete with a seven shakra tall fire breathing polar bear,” Jason noted to Zaa, which made her laugh.

“If you would follow me, esteemed guests, I’ll see you to a stateroom,” Marayi called. “This ship requires jump restraints to transit a Stargate.”

“You can carry Aria up to the bridge, Jokik. Marayi promised to let her sit in the captain’s chair,” Jason called.

“I’m sure there are enough seats up on the bridge for all of us,” Voss prompted. “I’ve never been on this ship class before, but I’m sure it has an expanded bridge. All the other battleships do.”

“It does have a fleet operations com-con,” Marayi nodded. “And I think there might be enough seats for everyone, if you’d prefer to enjoy the trip from the bridge.”

“That’s always way cooler than sitting in a glorified living room,” Kreel declared.

Marayi escorted them up to the bridge, making sure to brag a bit about her ship as they did so. The fleet battleships had truly impressed the council during the battle, scoring an impressive number of super-ship kills, and Jason ended up explaining the unclassified part of the theory behind Teryon rail cannons to the others when Voss asked what kind of weaponry they used to destroy ships so much bigger than themselves. “It gives these ships

a weapon nearly as destructive as a GRAF cannon at ranges that exceed the more powerful beam weapons employed by the vast majority of Naval line vessels we've come across, which makes these ships a very dangerous threat," Jason finished as the lift stopped and the doors opened to the passage that would take them to the bridge. "Most coherent energy forms used as weapons have a very short range due to energy decay, with the exception of things like lasers and neutron weaponry, energy forms that are inherently stable even when used at power levels high enough to make them weapons. Teryon weaponry has an even shorter range than MPACs due to the decay speed of Teryon energy in normal space, which is why we use a rail cannon to fire it at relativistic speed."

"Clever," Voss nodded.

"Clever is what we do in the House of Karinne, Voss," Jason chuckled.

The rulers were quite impressed by the bridge of the *Ori Ai*, which like regular battleships, was expanded so it could serve as the flag in fleet operations. KMS battleships and command ships were still the ships of choice to serve as the flag in CCM fleets due to their powerful defenses, ensuring that the commanding admiral would be alive to issue orders to the fleet during the battle. Jokik set Aria down in the captain's chair as Jason visited with the bridge crew, most of which he knew personally, while they waited for the rest of the task force to assemble. And it was a *big* task force that surprised Jason, because it wasn't purely KMS vessels. There were 120 ships in the formation, running from the *Arabax* and the battleships *Dreamer* and *Victory* all the way down to a quartet of Sha'i-ree pursuit class destroyers, very small, very fast ships about the size of a KMS frigate.

Marayi gave a little sigh when the *Dreamer* appeared on the forward viewscreen. "Homesick?" Jason asked.

"A little. We always miss our last command, Jason," she replied with a smile. "He's a very good ship, and Joni is a fine captain that will serve him well. But I like my new ship more. Who would have known that I was being an Oracle myself when I named the ship?"

He had to laugh. "That was a bit prophetic," he agreed. "The ship named the *Dreamer* going to the Dreamer homeworld. But at least we have it on the record that you named the ship long before we knew about the

Dreamers. Maybe you do have a touch of precognition in you.” He gave her a suspicious look. “Just don’t go insane on me,” he ordered. “I spent too much money training you to put you out on a medical discharge.”

She gave him a look, then laughed helplessly. “Why do I get the feeling you’d sue me for the training costs?”

“Damn right I will,” he affirmed, which made her laugh harder.

The task force got underway, by Aria’s command as she sat in Marayi’s chair, while the rulers spread out to explore the bridge while they traveled to the gate. Jason stood by the helm with Zaa, going over a holographic map of the Dreamer’s moon, watching as the freighters that moved in before them spread out and started landing on the surface. Jrz’kii had a very detailed plan for this evacuation, and she was already starting to implement it by getting diplomats and emissaries from Yeri’s office down onto the surface to make contact with the Dreamers and explain what was going on. The evacuation fleet was already there, sitting in orbit along with the CCM fleet left behind to defend the moon, and they were watching when five of the eight command ships jumped into the system towing a gigantic orbital station. It was a Kouï cargo terminal that the Overmaster donated to the effort, and that station would be critical to their plan to evacuate the Dreamers within the time limit. The other two pieces of that plan arrived barely minutes later, as two of the other four command ships jumped in towing a Stargate, which they would link to a sister gate at Tir Tairngire. The other two arrived moments after that, towing the newly built and commissioned Nexus Two. Like Nexus One, it was built rather hastily inside the same class of refitted Potra cargo station, so it exactly resembled its prototype elder sibling, including having the exposed plasma feeds from the outer ring into the core, which would make it quite a spectacle when it was operating with those six streams of high-energy double metaphased plasma flowing from the outer ring into the core through open space.

“A nexus bridge?” Dahnai asked as she joined the two of them by the helm, looking at the hologram.

“The bridge is a key component of Jrz’kii’s evacuation plan.”

“How? Moving Dreamers four minutes out of every twelve?”

“No, I told Myleena to find a way to link Nexus Two and Nexus One together so we have a stable bridge, similar to a Stargate,” he answered. “It took her and Emia about three days to figure out. We’re going to use it as a Stargate for the operation. The freighters will move some Dreamers, but they’re mostly for their stuff. Most of them are going to move to the new planet using the bridge. Personnel transports will deliver them to Nexus Two, they’ll cross over to Nexus One, then another transport will take them to their new home.”

Dahnai’s eyes widened. “That’s brilliant!” she blurted.

“We’d never pull this off in time if not for the bridges,” he said modestly.

“What about the other side?”

“On Tir Tairngire? I have an army of Makati building new villages for them,” he answered. “Every village on the moon was scanned, and the Makati are building exact replicas of them on Tir Tairngire. As soon as a replica village is built, the residents of the original will be moved to it. So, a Dreamer will pack up, get taken to Nexus Two, bridge over to Nexus One, get on another transport, and be delivered to a village built to resemble their old one. Jerrim and Bunvar think that will help them with the transition, to have something familiar waiting for them over there. I think they’re right.”

She gave him a long look. “I forget how damn smart you are sometimes.”

“Don’t look at me, I’m just a Titan jockey. I have a staff to do the smart stuff,” he replied, which made her laugh.

“Says the guy that invented the bridge.”

“Actually, Emia did. I just used it in a way she didn’t originally intend,” he corrected modestly.

“So, exactly how did you get those gigantic things over here?” Dahnai asked, looking over at him. “They’re way too big to fit through a Stargate.”

“Your Stargates, not mine,” he scoffed in reply. “You forgot about Gate Paragon, didn’t you?”

She gave a sudden laugh. “You moved it!”

“We have it sitting on the edge of the Prakka system right now, so it doesn’t interfere with the Stargate at 21-F, and the fact that those are here means it’s linked with the sister gate at Skirasis,” he replied.

“I totally forgot about those things!” she admitted.

“And you call yourself an Empress,” he teased, earning him a whack.

“All personnel to jump restraints. Gate passage in six minutes,” a voice called over the ship’s PA system. *“All personnel to jump restraints.”*

“Begin gate passage protocols!” Marayi barked, her voice audible across the bridge. “Olara, have all sections report readiness to comm nine. Noble ladies and gentlemen, if you would kindly find a chair in the com-con and secure your jump restraints?” she asked in a respectful voice.

Once they were through the Stargate, the procession made its way to the landing bay, where a large contingent of corvettes, gunboats, fighters, and exomechs were assembled to take them down to the surface. They wouldn’t be riding in a corvette, they’d be in a KT-120 military executive dropship, one of the luxury models that was heavily armed, built to ferry around VIPs and flag level officers...well, the *others* would be. Jason detoured over to the end of the bay with Aria, put on his helmet, and the two of them rose up into the cockpits of his Titan, him in the pilot’s cockpit and his daughter up in the head cockpit. It was one of six standing in a row, their heads nearly scraping the top of the landing bay, sitting in anchored bays designed to carry them. The *Ori Ai* was designed to be able to carry Titans and had bay spaces for 20 of them. The other five belonged to his guards, and they entered them and brought them online as Jason stepped his rig out of its anchors. Usually, Aya would go nuts with him riding in a rig rather than in a heavily armored dropship, but when it came to a Titan, he was probably safer in his mecha than he was in the dropship. He’d proven over the last couple of takirs that he *belonged* in a Titan. *You ready up there, little treasure?* he asked as he picked up his disruptor and carefully slung it over his back. There wasn’t enough space over his Titan’s head to lift his arm very far up over his head.

Locked in and ready, Pam! Aria replied in excitement.

I’ll turn on the head’s up displays so you can see what I see, hold on a second. Ready, Aya?

We're all ready, Jason, she answered as his five guards stepped out of their bays.

Alright, let's lead the others down to the surface.

[You didn't tell me you brought your mecha,] Dahnai accused from the dropship.

[You sit in there and endure all that boring chatter. I'm going to get down in style,] he teased in reply.

[Yeah, everyone in here heard that, babes,] she warned.

[So? Does that make it any less true? Odds are, they find it just as boring as I do,] he challenged, which made her laugh despite herself.

Jason and his guards were part of the escort formation bringing the rulers down, coming down far from the city they'd attacked just yesterday. They were coming down in the tropical belt along the south coast of the largest continent on the moon, the land below them green and crosshatched with farms and fields. And not a tree anywhere in sight. Not a tree anywhere on the moon.

They landed outside a large village that sat on a hill overlooking the ocean, something that looked like a set out of a fantasy movie like *Lord of the Rings*, except for the ten dropships and skimmers parked along the edges of the village. The low rolling hills, covered in vibrant grass and farm fields, could almost be the Shire from the *Hobbit*, except for the fact that the village was built above ground and not burrows dug into the hillsides. Because there was no such thing as wood on this moon, their huts and buildings were built of stone beams quarried from the ground and covered in a flax-like material like thatch that was woven together almost like cloth and then secured to the stone supports, making their huts look almost medieval, like a peasant village from Terra's middle ages. There were several Dreamers standing near the ships when they landed, dressed in those skin-covering robe-like garments with the pants and shirts on under them, wearing wide straw hats to protect against the sun. This was a world where no shade existed except what was created, so the Dreamers had developed attire designed to protect against the sun. Jason opened the cockpit and stepped out, then he floated down to the ground with Aria right behind him. A Kimdori came out of the largest hut along with three

Dreamers and approached them, and when he took off his helmet to greet the Kimdori whom he didn't know, the two men and woman she was leading gasped loudly and gave sudden, hasty bows. "It's true," the woman said in her native language, daring to stagger towards him, putting her hands on the Phoenix relief on his armored chest. "The Phoenix has come. After so many years of waiting, the Phoenix has come." Tears started streaming down her cheeks as she looked up at him with total adulation, then she put a trembling hand on his face. "Have you come to take us to Tir Tairngire? Is the Promised Land waiting for us?"

"That's why I'm here," he assured her in her language, putting his hands on her shoulders and smiling down at her. "We're here to talk to you about moving the Dreamers to Tir Tairngire."

She threw herself against him, clutching to his armor tightly, which made him feel both a little awkward and a lot of empathy. For centuries, her people had been abused and tormented by the Benga, and now it was over. He put a gauntleted hand on her back and patted it, then kept his arm around her as the Kimdori stepped up. "How many village Elders did you gather?"

"Nearly a hundred," the small, wiry male with soft red fur answered. "Sixteen wait in the main meeting hall, and the others are on the way in dropships. This is Malat Arlo, Elder of this village, your Grace," he introduced, motioning to the taller of the two Dreamers. "This is Belat Pard, Elder of the village closest to this one, and she is Deila Grot, Elder of the village on the far side of Delat's."

"It's nice to meet you," Jason said. "I'm Jason Karinne, Grand Duke of the House of Karinne. And this is Aria," he said, motioning towards his adopted daughter. "We rescued her from a Benga ship, and she's the reason we're here."

"Hello," Aria said, a bit shyly, looking at the two Dreamer men, who shared her skin color.

"Welcome, Little Kaima," one of the men, Malat, replied with a smile. In their language, a *kaima* was a small bird, like a sparrow.

The other rulers reached them, and the Kimdori introduced them to the Elders. Jason found it a bit interesting that the Elders didn't use their names,

they used their Dreamer titles, which in Dahnai's case made her quite happy. She liked her *Valkyrie* title. It was the first time he'd heard a few of those titles, and a couple made his eyes raise a little. It was no stretch to call Shakizarr the Hunter, but it was a bit of a surprise to hear Malat call Enva the Hammer...that was quite a misnomer on several levels for the ethereally beautiful and gracious Sha'i-ree. And in Enva's case, she looked slightly offended by it.

The fawning only got worse when they were escorted into the main meeting hall, a large circular building in the center of the village that reminded Jason vaguely of a circus tent and met the other Elders. Deila was still clinging to him almost adoringly. Some of the Elders cried when he was introduced, and they all stared at him like he was some kind of miracle. And with each new Elder that arrived, he went through that all over again.

When the last of the Elders arrived, Jason stepped before their seats and addressed them. "As many of you suspect, we're here to fulfill one of the oldest prophecies in your writings," he said, which caused some excited sounds and a few squeals of delight. "We've driven the Syndicate off the moon, and now we're going to take the Dreamers to Tir Tairngire. The Promised Land," he declared. "What we're here to do is tell you our plan and secure your cooperation to spread the word to the other Dreamer villages. What we ask of you, friends, is to go to the villages on other continents and tell their Elders that the time has come, and to prepare their people for the exodus. The Dreamers there may be suspicious of the agents we send to spread the word, but we feel that if one of you are with them, you can confirm who we are and help speed things up. We're on a very tight schedule here, friends," he warned. "The Syndicate's main fleet is on the way, and we don't want to have to fight them. So we want all the Dreamers and their possessions moved off this moon in five and a half *makra*. It's going to be a bit hectic, but my logistics experts believe it can be done. When the Syndicate reaches the moon, we want them to find nothing but empty villages."

"Your idea has merit, noble Phoenix, but is unnecessary," one of them said, standing as he spoke. "You are the Phoenix. We have waited for you for hundreds of years, and your arrival means that our long suffering is ended. All you need do is tell the Dreamers to move, and we will move.

Our ancient writings make it clear, you will lead us to the Promised Land and herald a golden age of peace and prosperity for our people.”

“I’m sure it could be that easy, but there’s only one of me, esteemed Elder, and I can’t visit every village. It would take too much time.”

“We’re not averse to the usefulness of technology, noble Phoenix,” another said. “And there is not an Elder alive that would not recognize you on sight. It is written that the Phoenix will send silver globes that will twist his likeness into the very air itself to proclaim his arrival, and will herald the beginning of the Golden Age by calling the Dreamers to the Promised Land,” he intoned, almost sonorously.

“A camera pod projecting a hologram?” Dahnai said from the side, her face puzzled.

“That would look like the air twisting into a visage,” Enva agreed. “And CCM camera pods are silver orbs.”

“Just send your silver globes, noble Phoenix, and have them proclaim your arrival with your likeness and message, and our people will obey,” the Elder told him.

“Alright,” Jason said after a moment’s thought. “Then I guess that’ll make it easy if I tell the Dreamers to start packing and wait for the arrival of my people, who will get them ready to move to their new home. But it’s still good that you’re here, my friends, because you can help me craft a message that explains everything and prepares them for what’s to come and keep it relatively brief. You know your people, so you’ll know the best way for me to talk to them.”

“We would be honored to be of help to you,” he said humbly. “But I must ask, no beg, one favor. Can we see it? Can we see Tir Tairngire?”

“Of course you can,” he smiled, He out a finger to his interface, stepped back a few steps, then projected the largest hologram it could manage out in front of him, which made it about his own height. It was an image of the moon Tir Tairngire, a blue and green jewel floating in a black sky, with the blue gas giant behind it and in the upper left corner of the hologram. “This is Tir Tairngire,” he told them. “We found a place that closely resembles your own homeworld so it feels comfortable to you, but this new world does have some major differences, like very large plants with wide and hard

stems we call trees. There are no trees here, but there are trees on Tir Tairngire.” The image zoomed in quickly, down to a construction site where Makati were building a village on the edge of a forest. “I have my people building villages for you that are patterned after the villages here, so for your people, you’ll be arriving somewhere that seems familiar to where you left, but is also still very different. The houses my people are building are much sturdier than yours and built of modern materials, and they’ll also have technology in them to make your lives easier. They’ll only look similar to them on the outside. These are only temporary places to live, Elders,” he warned. “Just a place to feel comfortable as you learn about your new home and organize yourselves. When you’re ready, my people will build for you new towns and cities in whatever style you most favor and provide you with the technology the Syndicate has denied you. But this is what your new home looks like,” he said, causing the image to pan out, then sweep over a large grassy prairie bordered by the forest, the land dominated by gentle, low hills, then it rose up to show the blue gas giant hanging in the sky. “And what’s most important, Elders, this place is *isolated*. This moon is far away from anyone that might want to do you harm. It’s an entirely different *galaxy*. Here, you will be safe, you will be free, and you will have complete control over who you allow to come to your home. You will never again be forced to use your gifts against your will. Never again will Benga soldiers steal your children and murder their families. Never again will you have to hide who you are from those that would use you for their own gain. The promise I made to Aria is the same promise I give to you,” he told them strongly. “You will have control over your own destiny. Once you’re on Tir Tairngire, you will be *sovereign*. You will answer to no one, not even me, and be free to live however you wish. We will be there if you want us, and the House of Karinne will always serve to protect you from those that would try to use you the way the Syndicate did, but we can do those things without ever setting foot on Tir Tairngire.”

Aria looked away from the hologram, wiping at her eye. Dahnai reached over and put a comforting hand on the shoulder of her armor.

“After everything you’ve suffered, all the children you’ve lost, you *deserve* this promised land,” he finished, looking at the assembled Elders.

“It is as the dreams predicted,” one of them said.

“We are most grateful for what you are doing for us, noble Phoenix,” another said, “but to hide ourselves away from the rest of the universe is not our intent. We will have our Promised Land, and from that place of safety we can learn about the outside world and find our place in it.”

“Then that is exactly what you will do,” Jason answered with a smile. “We aren’t here to tell you what to do. We’re here to help you in whatever you decide to do. The only way we’ll impose on you is to make you move from this moon to Tir Tairngire, because you’re not safe here. But I get the feeling that that’s exactly what you want to do,” he smiled.

“We have waited for generations to go to the Promised Land, so yes, we are very much eager to leave this place,” Malat agreed in a jovial voice. “This is a time of great joy for us, noble visitors. This is a moment when our most hopeful dreams have come true. We are on the precipice of entering the Golden Age, and for one, I am grateful beyond words that I am alive to see it. To know that very soon, I will stand upon the earth of Tir Tairngire and know that my hardship has ended...I cannot explain how that feels,” he said, tearing up.

“Then I think you should find out right now,” Jason said, looking back towards the Kimdori envoy. “Is the Stargate at Tir Tairngire linked back to Karis?”

“It is, your Grace,” he answered with an approving nod.

“Then instead of showing you pictures of Tir Tairngire, let’s go there, esteemed Elders, so you can see it for yourself and bring back what you learn to your people,” Jason said, which made them gasp collectively. “I want you to see it. I want you to feel its wind on your face and the warmth of its sun on your shoulders. Then you can come home and tell the others that you walked on the Promised Land and prepare them for their own steps.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Kreel agreed. “Besides, I’d like to see it myself.”

The Elders almost stampeded them in their eagerness to go, and he had to calm them down a little bit, since they didn’t have a transport at the village big enough to carry all of them. Jason had the *Ori Ai* send down a jumper, and while the rulers rode on the executive dropship, Jason again

escorted them in his Titan, this time with Dahnai and Zaa in the head cockpit along with Aria. But it wasn't the *Ori Ai* sitting in orbit waiting for them, it was the both the *Tianne* and the *Kinai*, floating side by side in space with a formidable escort fleet surrounding them. Both had finished their towing duties and were again on the board, and as they approached, Jason found out that the *entire council* was aboard the two flagships. They'd gotten word that Jason was taking some Dreamers to Tir Tairngire, and they decided to invite themselves along.

After anchoring his Titan in a bay aboard the *Tianne*, he floated down and walked towards the KT-440 that had been brought in to bring up the Elders, a personnel transport that could carry 170 passengers, and could easily land in the main landing bay of a flagship. Coma manifested a hologram by them and moved it along with them as they walked towards the others, as the rulers got off the dropship and the Elders disembarked from the transport. *This is getting a bit hectic*, he noted to Aya as Kreel and Sk'Vrae led the others. *I'm surprised that the others are willing to trust their safety to your girls, Aya, but with so many of them in one place, things are getting spread thin.*

I have Marines on the detail, she answered, pointing to two Karinne Marines standing guard by one of the hatches leading into the ship. *Most of the other rulers feel safe on a KMS ship without needing large details, Jason, because of your undeniable neutrality. They trust you. But I still keep a large enough detail to provide complete protection despite that.*

It might be time for the captains of all the various royal guards to meet and have a long talk, Dahnai injected. *Set up a system like what we do when we meet on Terra and use them for things like this in addition to guarding the UN compound. I'm honored that the others will accept protection from my guards, but like you sent, I only have so many.*

Well, Dahnai, the answer to that is to not be so much of a flaming atomic ass that people want to kill you, Kreel sent cheekily from across the bay. That wasn't the exact wording of his thought, but since he didn't frame it, it allowed Jason to flavor his intent his own way, and it made him burst out into sudden almost uncontrollable laughter. So did most of the other telepaths in the landing bay.

You just wait 'til I get over there, furball, Dahnai sent in an ugly mental tone, glaring at him from across the bay. *The guards won't stop me from beating you up.*

Kreel grabbed hold of Krirara's arm and pushed her in front of him, using her as a proverbial shield, then staggered back when she elbowed him in the chest.

The very large fleet assembled to protect the entirety of the Confederate Council got moving with military precision once all their passengers were aboard, and Jason spent most of the trip explaining basic space travel to the Dreamers from a stateroom with a panoramic window, which was a bit cramped with all of them in there. They knew the basics about hyperspace, but he expanded that with Stargate theory to explain how they were going to move to an entirely different galaxy in a matter of hours.

It took going through five Stargates, going from the Dreamer's moon to Prakka to Terra to Karis and then on to Tir Tairngire, but they arrived about two hours later. It wasn't just the Dreamers who were nearly enthralled by the incredible view, the Milky Way galaxy hanging in the void out the window, the entire galaxy visible from that distance, and with the star, gas giant, and moon not visible since they were on the other side of the ship. "Incredible," Dahnai breathed, stepping up to him and curling her hand into his own, almost involuntarily. "It's so beautiful from out here."

"It is at that. I asked Palla to turn the ship so we'd get a good view of it." *Thanks, Palla. You can get us back on course now.*

I was happy to, Jason. The gas giant and moon will come into view in a moment.

"And to think, we'll look up at the sky and see such beauty every night," Deila whispered as she stood on Jason's other side.

"Half the time," he corrected modestly. "When your moon is oriented so the night sky is facing the galaxy, yes, you'll see that. But when it's on the other side, you'll see the stars in the Strands of Trelle and the other galaxies in our cosmic string, so far away they look like stars in the night sky."

"What does Andromeda look like from here?" Dahnai asked curiously.

“A very big, bright star from this distance, the brightest single point of light in the night sky that’s not the Milky Way or a local celestial body. We’re about the same distance from Andromeda here as we are from the Imperium,” he replied as the ship began to turn. It came into view just a brief moment later. “There,” he said, pointing at what looked like a very large, bright star in the sky, like the north star in the night sky back on Terra. Since Tir Tairngire was in the middle band of the three Strands of Trelle, it wasn’t the closest to Andromeda.... but even from that distance, Andromeda looked more the size of a close very bright star than a galaxy. The star that was the center of the Tir Tairngire system wasn’t directly between the two galaxies, it was actually at an angle of about 89.78333333 degrees from the imaginary line formed if one drew the line between the centers of the two galaxies, if that angle was formed at the center of the Milky Way. “Those stars there are the stars in the outer band of the Strands of Trelle, which is why they cluster up over there. Those stars over there are from all three bands of the strands, since we’re looking at them from the side and inside edge of their arc. Those stars over there aren’t stars, they’re the other galaxies in our cluster, as well as other galaxies in our supercluster. The brighter ones are galaxies in our cluster, and the dim ones are other galaxies in the supercluster.”

“A sky full of stars that are actually galaxies,” Malat murmured.

“Well, from the ground, with the diffusion of light through the atmosphere, the sky will actually look mostly black, with only the stars in the Strands of Trelle and two or three galaxies in our cluster visible, like Andromeda, Ilviros, Sumlaki Axiom, and you may be able to see Cygnus Proxima Ascending. That’s Cygnus right there,” he noted, pointing at another bright light in the sky. “But you will see something pretty interesting when you’re properly aligned. There,” he said, pointing as a large field of stars rotated into view, an elliptical patch of stars that covered a large portion of the sky. “That’s the Magnum Dwarf Stellar Supercluster, something of a miniature galaxy, the closest exo-galactic formation to our galaxy and not far from here, in a cosmic sense. It’s close enough for us to see it as a collection of stars rather than a cosmic formation. So, when Tir Tairngire is oriented the right way, you’ll have a sky at least a quarter full of stars.”

“Our Promised Land grows more and more interesting with every moment,” one of the Elders said.

When Tir Tairngire came into view, framed with the blue gas giant behind it as Palla had the navigator basically have the ship fly in a tight circle so they could see all the sights, Jason pointed it out to them. The sight rotated out of sight as the ship’s bow pointed towards the moon, then the ship slowed to a stop a good distance from the planet-sized moon. That made the Elders a bit antsy. “We’re not boarding the transports yet. The mass of this ship can affect the orbits of the moons around the gas giant, so the navigators are calculating our approach so that doesn’t happen,” he explained. “Once they determine the proper approach vector, we’ll get moving again. But we will be boarding in a short time, so we’re ready to leave as soon as we get into orbit.”

It didn’t take them long. The ship got moving again a moment later, and Palla called from the bridge that they were cleared to board the transports. The leaders of the Confederation boarded one KT-440 and the Elders boarded another one, but Jason, Dahnai, and Aria saddled up in his Titan along with his guards. The *Tianne’s* Titan company, the 222nd Marine Exomech company that their commander had named the Broadswords, were also in the bay, standing in a formation in front of the two personnel transports to serve as escort for the council and the Elders.

We’ll be leaving as soon as our tactical officers declare it safe for us to launch and our fighter and fast attack ship escorts are in position to protect us on the way down, Jason warned the Elders as he stepped his Titan out of its bay, slinging his disruptor over his back.

Is there that much danger here, noble Phoenix? Malat asked.

There’s no danger at all but understand that the members of the council that you met earlier are the rulers of their respective empires, so their protection is paramount, he answered. *It’s extremely rare for all of them to gather in one place like this, and with all of them being on the same transport, it’s fairly clear that that ship is going to be kept very safe.*

Understandable, but not all of them are living things. More than half of them are...something else.

Those are bionoids, Elder, they're machines that the leaders that resemble them use to see and hear what goes on without actually being here, he answered. I'll explain what those are later.

Ah, so you know of them, he sent in relief. We were unsure to warn you. We didn't know if you knew that so many of them weren't living things.

We built them, Elder Malat, Jason sent impishly. So yes, I know about them.

A very large escort of fighters, fast attack craft, exomechs, and the smallest CCM line vessels, Sha'i-ree pursuit class destroyers, KMS frigates, and Skaa tactical frigates followed them down to the moon's surface. Jason had trouble keeping his eyes on their entry vector, because he had the strangest feeling that he should be going in another direction, a nearly instinctive impulse that nearly made him change course several times during the descent. But he focused on the controlled descent and stayed with the escort, which aimed them at a replica village that the Makati were in the last stages of building. They had all the buildings up and the infrastructure installed, and now they were just doing the landscaping and a tiny bit of ground terraforming, smoothing out a hill behind the village that they'd partially dug out to make it look natural. They landed on a wide, relatively flat plain near the village that had clearly also been terraformed, flattening the land and placing topsoil over it to create ideal farmland. The village was surrounded by very low hills covered in grass with large lone trees with yellow leaves dotting the grassy prairie, and a forest was about ten kathra to the west, the line of trees visible from the village.

The reactions of the Elders as they got off their transport and walked towards the village were quite moving. Many of them looked around in wonder, and some of them had tears in their eyes. One of them, one of the older Elder women, fell to her knees and ran her fingers through the grass at the edge of the village, then buried her face in her hands and began to weep. Jason knelt beside her and comforted her, his arm around her and talking to her in a soothing, reassuring voice.

Malat best described his emotions as he walked past Jason and the sobbing Elder, walking slowly, almost in a daze as he looked at the forest to the west. "Home," he breathed. "After generations of waiting, we are home."

Jason helped the aged Elder woman back to her feet, keeping his arm around her. “This *is* your home, Malat,” Jason told him strongly. “This is your Promised Land, and it belongs to you and to your descendants. And this is one of the temporary villages my people are building for you, a place that will feel familiar as you adjust to your new lives here. And when you’re ready, they’ll build you new towns, new cities, in any manner you wish.”

“It is more than I ever hoped it could be,” Malat said reverently, turning in a slow circle and taking in the distant horizon. “The writings that describe the Promised Land do not do it justice. Such beauty,” he breathed, a single tear sliding down his cheek.

Jason took off his gauntlet and wiped at the tears on the Elder woman’s face with a gentle smile. “There’s no reason to cry, honored Elder,” he soothed.

“These are tears of joy, noble Phoenix,” she told him in a shaky voice, putting her hand on his face. “You have delivered us to the Promised Land as the dreams told us. I stand upon the holy soil of Tir Tairngire. I could die right now and know that my life ended complete.”

“I’d prefer you didn’t do that,” he told her with gentle mirth, patting her cheek.

The Makati foreman showed them around, his voice a bit nervous from addressing the entire Confederate Council, showing them the houses he’d built and explaining the building process a bit too in-depth for a ruler to really understand, then showed them holos of the village on the Dreamer moon that was the model for it. “We’re building them using the layouts of the original villages as templates,” he explained, speaking Faey as Ryn sent to the Dreamers as translation, since they didn’t speak Faey yet. “To give the Dreamers a sense of continuity. We can’t make them exactly identical due to infrastructure needs, but we can make them close enough to hopefully let the Dreamers feel at home here.”

“I would feel at home here if you put us in a cave, small red one,” one of the Elders said.

“We’d prefer you to have something nicer than a cave, Elder,” he replied after he got the translation. “These huts will do for the short term,

but they're not meant to be permanent. Once the Dreamers decide on how they want to do things, what materials to use and what style they want for their communities and towns and cities, we'll build it for them."

"I'm sure the Dreamers will enjoy being able to build something that is *theirs*, after so long of forced to build only what they could," Enva mused.

The Makati showed them around the rest of the village, then the Elders and the rulers spread out to explore the village and look around. But Jason wandered off from the main host, almost by instinct, walking up onto the top of the low hill behind the village and kneeling down. He put his hand down on the grass, and it just felt...*right*. The air here, the grass, the sun, the land, it all felt...felt both strange and hauntingly familiar at the same time. It *spoke* to him.

He felt something hot on his shoulder, then put his hand over it...and realized he had his hand over his *jaingi*. This place...could that be why it felt so...*welcoming*?

No, not *this* place. What he was looking for, the place that was calling to him, it was to the southwest. He could feel it, tugging at his heart the way the spot where he planted the seed of the *oye* tree did when the *shaman* sent him out on that little task. His heart was being pulled in a definite direction, and it was being called by a place.

There was a place here that he needed to see. There was somewhere here he needed to be.

And there was someone that needed to see it with him.

[*Cybi,*] he called all the way back to Karis. [*Have the Parri shaman put on a ship and brought to Tir Tairngire. Tell her it's terribly important that she come here. Have them bring her down to wherever I am when she gets here.*]

[*I'll see to it, Jason. Mind if I come along?*]

[*You're more than welcome.*]

He started back for his Titan, putting his gauntlet back on. *Aya, saddle up. Everyone else, stay here and keep watch over the Council.*

What are you about, Jason?

There's somewhere we need to go, Aya. Something we need to see, and I don't want an entourage. You're more than enough protection, given there's nothing on this moon that's a threat.

Are you leaving me here, Pam? Aria protested.

Of course not, my little treasure. If you want to come, go to the Titan.

You're not leaving me behind either, buster, Dahnai barked. *If Aria goes, I go. I'm family after all.*

With his two passengers, Jason and Aya lifted off from the village, and Jason turned his mecha in the direction his instincts were telling him to go. Southwest. They flew for nearly half an hour at a fair clip, as Aria and Dahnai passed the time asking questions he didn't answer and played with the spinners. When they reached the coastline, Jason suddenly veered to the west, forcing Aya to hurry to catch up, then he slowed to a stop over a small meadow at the top of a gentle ridge, in a hardwood forest that grew right up to the edge of the ocean, the coast irregular and rocky with large waves crashing into the stones. Mountains hemmed in the forest to the north, high peaks with snow capping their tops, creating quite a breathtaking vista.

This was the place.

Jason descended straight down in his Titan, then landed it at the edge of the meadow. He opened the cockpit and dropped down, then took off his gauntlets, dropped them on the ground as he walked forward, then stopped and knelt down. As soon as he put his fingers on the deep green, soft grass, almost like living velvet, he *knew* this was the place. This place...meant something. It was important.

Aria and Dahnai came up to him, and his daughter put a hand on his shoulder. "Pam?" she asked curiously.

"This place," he said in a distant voice. "It means something. I need the *shaman*. She can tell me what it means."

"What what means?"

"It's that Parri mysticism they infected him with," Dahnai said, a bit sourly. Aya joined them shortly after that, her helmet off and looking around curiously.

“I can...feel something,” he said, ignoring his *amu*. “This place has meaning. Purpose. It *matters*. But I don’t know why. Or how.”

“Well, it’s a really pretty spot,” Aria said, looking around.

“That’s not what he means, Aria. It’s—holy Trelle!” she gasped, looking to the side.

Jason looked that way as well and saw several absolutely massive shapes slink out of the forest. They were canine, their fur ghostly white, but they were easily ten shakra tall, like giant wolves. Their eyes were a deep, deep blue and nearly glowed in the sunlight, and the five of them advanced towards them slowly yet inexorably. Aya extended her pulse cannon and raised her arm, but Jason put his hand over her wrist and pushed down. “It’s alright,” he told her in a calm voice. He stepped in front of the women and let the five giant canines pad up to them, and the largest, the leader of the small pack, stopped with his head almost looming over Jason. He raised his arm slowly and held up his unarmored hand, and the giant wolf-like creature brought his nose down and sniffed at his hand curiously. “This place called me,” he told the giant wolf. “I don’t know why I’m supposed to be here.”

The wolf looked down at him, its large blue eyes blinking slowly.

Are they safe? Aria sent fearfully.

Jason can communicate with animals, Aria, Aya reminded her. Most animals aren’t aggressive towards him. But stay behind him and keep your helmet on. As long as you’re fully armored, they can’t hurt you.

The five massive canines regarded them, then the lead turned away and started back towards the trees. *Well, that was a bit nervous*, Dahnai admitted as the others followed.

A dropship came down smoothly and landed, and to Jason’s relief, the Parri *shaman* was visible behind the hatch when it opened. Cybi’s bionoid followed her out as she came down the steps, her eyes curious as the Parri waddled forward on her back legs, looking around. “Jason Karinne,” she said, her voice low and reverent.

“What does it mean, *shaman*?” he asked without explaining. But he didn’t need to explain, not to her.

She ambled forward on her back legs, which wasn't very graceful for her, until she reached him, and they both stared off into the distance in silence. The three ladies and Cybi stood behind them in quiet anticipation. "Can your heart hear it?"

"I...don't hear anything. But I feel...I *feel*," he breathed, then the two of them were silent for a very long moment. "My *god*," he finally said, his voice stunned.

"Your heart is learning to listen," the *shaman* said simply, looking down at him with a proud expression. "If you could use your iron bird to let me speak with the village, I'll have it brought."

"What brought?" Dahnai asked.

"The trees," Jason said, his voice nearly a whisper. "The *oye* trees. They'll *grow* here. We need a sapling, or a seed."

"And the first will be planted here," the *shaman* confirmed, pointing at the ground. "The first of many to come. The trees will grow here without needing tending, Dahnai Merrane. The love of this world will make them flourish. In but years, *oye* trees will spread across this world and fill it with fruit, flower, and joy. And this makes three," she said in a serene murmur. "Three worlds where our trees will grow. It fills me with hope, Jason Karinne, that the light of love we labor to spread through the darkness is starting to take hold."

"Will you need a village?" Jason asked.

"No. The tree will flourish with no need for tending, sustained by the love of this world alone," she answered. "In this place, this special place, it will mature, flower, and produce seed. The birds will carry the seeds across the land, and soon thereafter, more trees will take root and begin to grow. But in time, Jason Karinne, some number of us will want to come here," she told him. "A world where our trees will grow is a world where we would wish to dwell."

"I'll discuss it with the Dreamers," he told her. "This is *their* world. But I don't think they'll say no. I think they'd enjoy the company of the Parri, *shaman*."

“Lady Cybi, if you would help me get in touch with the village using the talking box?” she asked, turning to look back at the four of them.

“Of course, *shaman*,” she smiled, motioning towards the dropship.

“But things are unseemly,” she said, glancing around. “There are those missing who needs be here when the seed is planted.”

“Who is that?” Dahnai asked.

“Jason Karinne knows, Dahnai Merrane.”

“Jayce,” Dahnai prompted, her voice carrying something of an impatient edge as Cybi led the Parri back into the dropship, returning on all fours to go faster. She stopped to nuzzle Aria, which made the young Dreamer giggle despite herself.

“The Dreamers need to be here,” he said musingly, his voice serene and distant. “The Elders need to be here. This is their world, and the trees that grow here will be their trees. They need to be here to see the first of them planted. Aya,” he prompted.

You know the Council will demand to come as well.

“Let them,” he replied. “It won’t hurt to let them witness the planting, but it will hurt if the Dreamers aren’t here. Aria.”

“Yes, Pam?”

“*You* will plant the seed,” he told her, turning and looking at her. “You belong to both this world and Karis, so you should be the one to plant the seed. A seed of Karis being planted in a new world requires a hand that can lay claim to both as her birthright.”

“Is it hard?”

“Not at all,” he replied with a smile.

I’ll call back to the village, Aya reported, then put a finger to her interface. How do I explain this?

“Just be honest. Tell them we’re planting an *oye* tree, it has to be planted here, and everyone needs to come.”

Jason walked slowly around the small meadow as he waited for confirmation, his mind filled with a wordless song. He wasn’t sure what it

was, he wasn't sure where it was coming from, but he was absolutely convinced that he was hearing it, and that he was starting to make sense of the wordless melody. It didn't convey words, or even thought, it conveyed *emotion*, complex and layered and intricate, a song of feelings that would do the most skilled Colonist empath proud in both its complexity and subtlety.

It was like...this land, this world, was welcoming the Dreamers into its fold. As if it had been waiting for them, nearly as long as the Dreamers had waited for Jason to come and bring them. This was *their home*, and the soul of this world itself was confirming that they *belonged* here.

This was Tir Tairngire. This was the Promised Land, and it belonged to the Dreamers just as much as the Dreamers belonged to *this world*. It was their home, it was their heart, and it was their soul. He knelt down and ran his fingers through the grass, lost in the reverie that only his ears could hear.

Aria stepped up to him, looking over at him. With him kneeling, she was a little taller than he was. "Pam?" she asked in concern.

It's alright, my little treasure, he assured her. I told you once before that I have a special relationship with the Parri. That I believe in their mysticism, because I've experienced it first-hand. Well, you're seeing one way it works.

I think it's kinda neat. What's it like? What can you hear?

It's hard to explain. It's like...this world is singing to me, Aria, but not in words. It does it in emotions. I don't understand barely any of what I'm hearing, but there are a few parts I can make out. And what I hear the loudest is that this world belongs to your people, he told her. And it has nothing to do with logic or reason or protection or safety. The Dreamers belong here. This world considers them to be its people, and it wants them here just as much as they want to be here. This world is overjoyed that its people are finally coming home. This is truly their Promised Land, far more than I ever knew, he mused with a wry audible little chuckle.

Wow, really? Planets talk?

This one does. I don't know about the others, he answered honestly.

Does Karis?

The Parri say that it does, but I've never heard it. Someday, maybe I will. I think I'd like that, because Karis is my promised land. I'd love to hear what Karis has to say about all the work we've done to restore it after it was destroyed in the Third Civil War.

I think it would like the way things are turning out. Karis is a beautiful place. I don't want to live anywhere else.

He gave her a loving smile, then put an arm around her armored waist. *You and my other kids are what make Karis the best place in the world, Aria*, he told her.

About half an hour later, everyone arrived at once. A second dropship came down from orbit and landed by the first, and barely seconds later, the transports holding the Elders and the Council came over the tree line to the east and began to slow. A young Parri with just a couple of *jaingi* waddled out carrying a clay pot holding well-watered dirt, and Jason and the *shaman* met him as soon as he managed to navigate the stairs on his hind legs. "It'll be a little easier for me to carry it," Jason told him with a smile.

"Many thanks, Jason Karinne," he replied with a nod. "Did I bring the proper seed, *shaman*?"

"You chose correctly, my young apprentice," she replied with a satisfied nod. "Well done."

He gave her a bright look of gratitude.

The Elders and the rulers filed over as they got off the transports, meeting Jason and the others as they carried the clay pot up the hill, Aria looking quite eager as she carried along the hand spade that was also brought. "This is quite a lovely place," one of the Elders said, one of their older women, her brown faced lined by years of toil out in the fields. "We are to plant a tree here, noble Phoenix?"

"A very special kind of tree, Elder," Jason answered her. "Which will only grow on two other worlds in the entire galaxy. They're called *oye* trees."

"Trust me, you want them here," Dahnai told the woman. "The fruits they produce are the most delicious you'll ever eat."

"Did I hear that right, Jason? It's an *oye* tree?" Krirara asked curiously.

“They’ll grow here, Krirara,” Jason answered with a nod. “So this isn’t just some impromptu tree planting ceremony. This *matters*.”

“Does that not mean that this world is filled with love, peace, and harmony? Is that not the only place that *oye* trees will grow?”

“If you believe that kind of thing,” Dahnai answered her.

Krirara’s words had a profound effect on the Dreamers. They looked at the tiny clay vessel as if they’d realized something, then Jason remembered that they were *precognates*. No doubt they had a prediction about the tree but hadn’t understood exactly what it meant until that moment, or didn’t know that a prediction was tied to the tree until that moment.

“And the world will open its arms and welcome us to the Promised Land by the hand of the Little Sparrow,” one of them said in a sonorous tone, looking at the spade in Aria’s hand. “She who carries the seed.”

“The passage was literal,” another noted reverently. “The seed of this tree is the seed from the passage.”

Jason knelt down, and Aria followed suit, holding the small spade with an eager expression. He touched the grass at the very top of the small, gentle hill, and she set to work digging a small hole. When it was deep enough, he offered her the pot. “Take the seed, little treasure, and put it in the hole, then dump the dirt on top of it. Take off your gauntlet first,” he warned. “It has to touch your bare skin.”

“Alright.” She followed his instructions, taking off her gauntlet and then taking hold of the tiny seed. She placed it carefully at the bottom of the hole, then took the small clay pot and dumped the dirt on top of it. She patted it down, then gave him a smile.

Much to the surprise of everyone there, the Dreamers suddenly broke into song, and it was hauntingly beautiful. Like Faey, their language was musical, but it was far more musical than the Faey language when set to music and sung with tempo. The words flowed into one another along with the melody and harmony, producing a music more complex and complete than a full orchestra.

Long days of toil and sorrow

As we wait for the coming of the Phoenix.

Heartache and despair

As we wait for the coming of the Phoenix.

Abide, Children of the Dream

Persevere, Children of the Dream

The sky will burn in holy fire

Heralding the coming of the Phoenix.

Rejoice, rejoice, Children of the Dream

Sing of days unburdened.

The Promised Land awaits us

With the coming of the Phoenix.

We go to Tir Tairngire

We will walk on holy ground.

Rejoice, rejoice, Dreamers

The coming of the Phoenix.

A land of safety and joy

A land of protection and peace

A land of music and laughter

Tir Tairngire awaits us.

We go to Tir Tairngire

We will walk on holy ground.

Rejoice, rejoice, Dreamers

The Phoenix brings us home.

The entire council was dead quiet. The last notes of the amazing melody of the song echoed off the distant mountains, as Jason stood up with Aria and turned to face the gathered rulers. They may not have understood the words, but they understood the purity of the emotion rippling through the song. Seconds later, an answer came from the forest, in the howls of the large canines that was pitch perfect with the final note of the song, almost as if the wolves were voicing the soul of this world as it answered the plea of their song and called them home.

There was little to do after that. The Council returned to the *Tianne*, the Dreamers were taken back to their moon to spread the word, but Jason stayed in the meadow with his guards, Aria, Dahnai, Cybi, and the *shaman* for a while, Dahnai, Cybi, and Aria walking along the rocky coast as Jason and the *shaman* walked across the far side of the meadow. They walked in silence for quite a while, walking nearly three times around the border of the meadow, until the *shaman* reared up onto her hind legs and slowed to a stop next to one of the hardwood trees that grew between the meadow and the mountains to the north. She ran her hand up the smooth tan bark of the tree, with leaves that vaguely reminded Jason of elm leaves but were three times the size, leaves shaped like elm leaves but were the size of magnolia leaves. “There is much here, Jason Karinne,” she told him. “This world speaks in a powerful voice.”

“Why haven’t I heard Karis like this?”

“The soul of Karis still recovers, Jason Karinne. Its voice is not yet strong enough for you to hear,” she answered. “But in time, as you learn to listen and the soul of Karis gains strength, you will. Time and patience will bring it about.” She turned to face him, then put a hand on his shoulder. “But it proves that you have learned to listen to the voice of the soul, Jason Karinne. You have taken another step down the path before you. Steadily do you progress down the path of the *shaman*, Jason Karinne. I am proud of you.”

She put her finger to the shoulder of his armor, and she began to draw the design of a *jaingi*. Her stubby fingertip discolored the black armor, turning it ghostly white as she swiftly and expertly drew a flowing, looping design across his shoulder. He knew without even looking that the same design was being drawn into the skin under the armor, and that it was permanent. “The voice of the soul is a silent whisper to those who have not learned to listen with their hearts, Jason Karinne, but to those who can hear, it is a song. A music of emotion and feelings that shimmer across the void, as soul calls soul to assuage the loneliness that touches us all. Our souls call out to each other for companionship and support, Jason Karinne, and those that call out in love are the loudest.” She stepped behind him, and his sensor mesh let him feel it as her finger traced off his shoulder and over his upper back, sliding and swirling and curling as she drew an even larger *jaingi* across his shoulders and shoulder blades, tracing all the way down to his waist and then coming back up in a roughly triangular motion. “The Dreamers call you the Phoenix, which I believe is a bird of great mystical power. It is only fitting that the Phoenix be granted his wings.” She finished up by sliding her finger to his original *jaingi*, joining it to whatever she did to his back. “It is a fitting title, Jason Karinne.”

He used the camera in his helmet to see what she did to him, using his telekinesis to float the helmet behind him and look through its camera. She drew the Legion Phoenix across his back, but its lines were *jaingi*, as were the lines within that gave the drawing detail and depth, creating a *jaingi* that, when taken in all at once, appeared to be something different. It looked a tiny bit distorted due to the housing on the back of his armor, but when he zoomed out it looked proper. The wingtips of the relief joined with the two proper *jaingi* on his shoulders, forming a single large *jaingi*.

He hoped that Jyslin wasn't *too* upset that she'd done that to him. He knew it went down into his skin, and he also knew that not only was it permanent, but he wouldn't have it removed anyway. The *jaingi* was a part of him, and to remove it was to remove a part of himself.

“Continue to listen, Jason Karinne, and perhaps very soon, the song of the soul of Karis will reveal itself to you,” she told him with a gentle smile. “But know that the soul of Karis loves you. You are his dutiful son, bringing soothing relief to his many wounds and bringing love back to

resonate in his soul. He recovers, Jason Karinne, and hopefully, very soon, he will be strong enough for you to hear him.”

“I hope so. No matter what else may happen to get in the way, restoring Karis is still my primary goal. It is what I was meant to do, and I will see it through to the end. My work won’t be done until the day the *oye* trees will grow and spread without tending. I will pass on to Rann and my children the world that was meant to be theirs,” he declared resolutely.

“You have come far, Jason Karinne, but there is still quite a ways to go.”

“Someday I hope to see the end of that path, *shaman*.”

“You will, Jason Karinne, but know that the journey never truly ends. The end of one path is naught but the beginning of the next. That is the meaning of life.”

He gave a chuckle as they turned back for the dropship and Titan. “And to think, all this time, all billions of wondering souls has to do was come ask you,” he told her lightly.

“All answers are simple ones, Jason Karinne, no matter how complex the question might seem.”

It didn’t look bad at all.

Barely two hours later, Jason was standing in front of a mirror in his bedroom, his armor was off and regarding his image in a hologram projected beside the mirror from the camera pod hovering behind him. As he suspected, the Legion Phoenix that the *shaman* drew on his back looked much better on his back than it did on his armor, due to the flared housing on the back holding the grav engines and other equipment. It was a perfect drawing of the Legion Phoenix used in the house crest, but its lines weren’t entirely straight. A third *jaingi* was cleverly embedded into that image, was made up to be a part of it, but his eyes could see it lurking within. The *jaingi* itself didn’t look that bad, pale white lines crisscrossing his tanned skin, which made it somewhat subtle. The wingtips of the bird connected to the *jaingi* on both of his shoulders, and the beak of the bird’s upward tilted beak went up the back of his neck, ending just below his hairline.

Jyslin might have something to say about that, Aya remarked dryly from across the room.

Well, she'd better get used to it, Jason answered, raising his arms and seeing how the movement of the muscles in his back changed the way it looked. And he was a bit surprised to see so much muscle back there. He'd really gotten into shape since deciding to become a rigger, had lost his paunch and regained both his muscle tone and some of the bulk he used to have when he played football. He didn't look like a guy that spent most of his time sitting at a desk. He looked like the athlete he used to be...like a soldier. I like it.

It does look nice, but you know how Jyslin feels about tattoos.

This isn't a tattoo.

What? Did you get a tattoo? Jyslin sent from the practice facility. Given it was only about 45 kathra away, that put him more than in range of her with her increased power since becoming a Generation, even when he wasn't sending with much strength. The bond they shared gave her a light touch on him at all times, able to hear his open sending from just about anywhere within her range no matter how strong his sending was.

No, I didn't get a tattoo, he answered. Access camera pod six, you can see it.

Sec. There was a long pause. Alright, that looks pretty cool. Did the Parri do it?

Yes, it's a jaingi, he affirmed. I had something of a mystical episode on Tir Tairngire. I'll tell you all about it when you get home.

How did you end up there?

I took the Elders to see their new home, so they could tell the other Dreamers about it, he replied. The whole thing went rather well. I addressed the entire Dreamer race using camera pods in their villages and a hologram about half an hour ago, and the operation to move them will start in earnest tomorrow. I think the first village gets moved tomorrow afternoon our time. I just got home a few minutes ago. That reminds me, I need to talk to Red Horn.

Why?

Because they're going to build us a vacation house on Tir Tairngire, he replied, sending her a memory of the meadow where they planted the seed. They're gonna build us a nice house down at the shoreline overlooking the ocean. I fully intend to spend a weekend a month there. It's such a lovely place, Jys, you have to see it with your own eyes.

It does look beautiful.

It's more than that. You have to go there in person, to feel it. I haven't felt so at peace anywhere since I came to Karis, back when it was just us and the strip girls. That vacation house will be the perfect place for me to go whenever I feel frazzled and need a few days of peace and quiet.

Don't finalize anything 'til I get home, I want to help with the design, she said. More to the point, I want to make sure you put what I want in the house.

No, we will not be installing a pleasure palace for you to house your harem, he chided, which made her send back pure amusement.

I'm not the one with 22 kids, baby, she challenged.

You would be if you tried harder.

You're delving into the realm of the physically impossible.

A determined woman defies all to accomplish her goal, he retorted playfully.

I'm game if you are, baby, she sent with a twist of lust slithering through her thought.

Then get home so we can start rewriting Songa's biology books, he told her.

I'll be home in about an hour. Ask Ayama and Seido to start dinner so it's ready when I get there, I'm hungry.

I'll tell them. Let me get some paperwork done before you get home, baby.

Sure, I need to finish these profit projections for the IBL. They gotta make sure we're making money, she sent sourly.

More like you can rub our profits in their faces. All that stink they raised over us not allowing away fans to travel to Karis, and our gate profits are the highest in the IBL.

That's because we have one of the biggest stadiums in the IBL.

And we sell it out every game, both home and away, he noted.

Trelle, I still want to kiss Myli for inventing that stadium holoprojection system, she sent with admiration in her thought. Anyway, see you when I get home.

Sure thing, love. See you soon.. He turned this way and that and studied both his reflection and the hologram of his back, and he again admired the *jaingi* both in its lines and how it moved when he moved, making it nearly seem alive. And he again had to admire himself a tiny bit, quite satisfied with the result of all that work in the gym. He seriously looked like he was a safety on the Michigan football team once again, just with a much older face.

Amazing what a little thing like taking his vow to defend his planet and his people literally could do for a man's motivation...and his abdominals.

Well, time to get back to work, I suppose, he sent evenly. Any word from Zaa about Kraal's report?

Nothing yet, Aya answered. She had access to that information. But I'm sure the Syndicate's rulers are quite unhappy at the moment.

No doubt, he agreed. Kraal will tell us just how unhappy they are when he gets that report ready. What word on the guard academy?

Red Horn broke ground on it two days ago. In about a month, it'll be ready.

Good deal. Find enough candidates for the first class yet?

A few, she replied. At least ones that meet the requirements and passed the screening. If these last two girls pass their final screening, we'll have four in the first class. We'll see what they're made of when they start the training. That was no idle remark. The training to become an Imperial Guard was some of the roughest in the galaxy, testing a candidate's intelligence, discipline, determination, courage, and fortitude. The

requirements to get in were some of the most stringent in the Imperium, and among those rare few, a good three quarters of them didn't make it through the training. And the training regimen that Aya had devised for the new Ducal Guard was virtually the same as Imperial training, mainly so the Imperial Guard would have reason to trust the Ducal Guard and call on them when they needed extra help. Given that Aya only had one planet of potential candidates, that meant that there may only be around four or five qualified candidates in the first training class. And there would never be as many Ducal Guard as there were Imperial Guard, but that was fine with Jason. If he could field a corps of thirty trained guards, he'd be happy, where there were about a thousand Imperial Guard, defending Dahnai's assorted properties and holdings across the Imperium, including the Summer Palace on Karis.

An empire of over eighty star systems, and the Imperial Guard only numbered a thousand...and *not* because they didn't accept qualified candidates. That more than anything demonstrated just how elite they were, why even the rulers of other empires highly respected the Imperial Guard, and why Jason still considered himself lucky beyond words that he had 45 of them dispatched to protect him and his family. Those 45 women were quite literally the best the Imperium had to offer, and he trusted them not only with his life, but the lives of his family and children. Aya drove him crazy sometimes, but he would never, ever, put his nose up at her devotion to protect him and his children.

Four? More than I expected.

One of them is a Shio, she told him, her thought a little condescending.

Don't get racist on me now, Aya, he teased. If it's who I think it is, she has a good chance of passing.

Let me guess, Akello Brightshine?

Yup.

You're right. But you're still a sexist.

I doubt any man could complete the training. They're too easily distracted, she sent cuttingly, but with a subtle undercurrent of humor.

You keep thinking that, woman, because someday you're gonna be unpleasantly surprised.

You prove my point every day, she shot back. You're the strongest and most disciplined man I know, yet even you can't help but chase the butterflies. I think there's just something fundamentally different about a man's brain that makes it impossible for them to focus on anything for very long.

He turned and gave her a cool look, and she smiled ever so slightly in reply. *I think the panel in your barracks office is beeping, Aya,* he sent caustically.

I'm sure it is, she replied.

Chapter 7

Raira, 3 Miraa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Tuesday, 4 February 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

Raira, 3 Miraa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

“The Meadow,” Tir Tairngire

He *needed* this.

After the last two days of long, sometimes intense meetings and conferences and appointments, so soon after the military operation to free the Dreamers, Jason had come close to burning out last night. So, Jyslin, God bless her soul, had all but ordered him to take today off and just rest. And she saw it as the perfect opportunity to bring everyone to Tir Tairngire and let them see where he planned to build his vacation house. The only appointment he had for today was to meet with a contingent of Red Horn architects, scheduled to arrive in about two hours, and look over the land and select the best place to build his house, and what kind of house to build. He'd brought the entire strip along with him, both mothers and children, and they were having a ball running around exploring—and running the guards a bit ragged given that the forest was populated with some very large wild animals—while Jason quite literally laid on a beach blanket at the edge of the meadow, hands behind his head as he looked up into a blue sky populated by fluffy white clouds and relaxed. He was wearing only a pair of cargo shorts and a pair of dock shoes, leaving his muscled torso bare, his tee shirt sitting on the blanket beside him as he relaxed to the sound of the waves crashing against the rocks just shakra from the edge of his blanket, the occasional spurt of foamy surf rising up over the ground level before falling back down to the rocks below.

He wasn't alone. Sitting beside him, and quite curiously sniffing at the drink cooler they brought along, was one of the massive wolf-like animals that called the forest home, one of the smaller ones. The three smaller ones were the cubs of the two even bigger ones, a family unit. The giant canines were actually quite friendly, at least once one got past how big they were, and what was most important, they didn't see Jason or any of his friends or family as prey. They preyed on even larger ram-like animals that roamed the forest, stout, gigantic beasts that stood nearly fifteen shakra tall at the shoulder, which was why they hunted in packs. Just one of them couldn't bring down an animal that size, but a pack could.

Yes, most predators that size would see them as prey, but Jason had come to learn that nothing on this planet was as it seemed. Everything had a secret, and the secret of the giant wolves was that they were exceptionally intelligent, easily as smart as a Terran or Faey, and were intelligent enough for a telepath to understand their thoughts, at least up to a point. That was something most telepaths couldn't do with most animals. The wolves had no "language" in the way most intelligent beings did, so their mental vocabulary was very limited and flavored heavily by their instincts and visual keys. They thought in sounds, smells, and pictures, not words, and it took a little time for Ryn to establish a common mental vocabulary with them, dealing with the rather common problem that telepaths encountered when dealing with a subject that didn't share a common language with them. But a telepath could comprehend their thoughts and could send to them in a way they could understand the same way they could non-telepaths. They were huge, and they had really big fangs, but they were *smart*, proving that one could never make assumptions based on what one could see. All it took was a little telepathic negotiation and a deal to allow the pack access to the property and promises of food to convince the pack that having Jason as a new neighbor wasn't a bad thing for them, and they were more than happy to allow Jason and his family to stay.

They were more like curious puppies than anything else, even the alpha male and alpha female. Given how smart they were, they had a natural curiosity about things, and it showed a lot about them that they weren't afraid of what they didn't know. One of them had tried to wriggle into the dropship and investigate the inside after they landed and had promptly

gotten himself stuck. Luckily, he didn't panic, and the guards were able to get him out without tearing out any fur.

Two days, and both a whole lot and very little had happened. A whole lot had happened in that the CCM was solidifying its hold on the Dreamer's home system, had made strides in cleaning out the military assets left behind by the Syndicate, scoring them a large number of operational walkers, combat mecha, and military hardware such as the mobile heavy Torsion gun batteries they'd faced. They'd cleaned up a lot of the debris from the battle and had started salvaging operational equipment from the disabled super-ships, mainly the ones hit by the GRAF cannons and Subrian reflex cannons. Those weapons did significant damage to the ships, but the primary way they took out the ships was by killing the crews. Zaa had a large number of Kimdori going over the intelligence they captured, including a working quantum entangled computer whose sister unit was on E Chaio. They'd also gotten most of the prisoners settled into temporary camps, awaiting the evacuation of the island that would be their prison without walls once all Dreamers were evacuated off of it.

And because of that need, that was where Jrz'kii had started her operation. After just 43 hours into the operation, Maiku Island was already 53% evacuated of all Dreamers, and the complete evacuation of all Dreamers and their possessions would be finished in six days. The Kizzik and Makati there were building temporary shelters for the prisoners as she evacuated Dreamers, preparing the island for their occupation, including bringing in enough food to last them for six months. That was more than enough for them to hold out until their fleet arrived.

Most of the prisoners would be on the island. Because of the need to deal with the Syndicate diplomatically in the future, they'd selected twenty Benga for a cultural education program...them teaching the Confederation about who they were, in their own words. Instead of sitting in an internment camp and just whittling or something until their fleet arrived, those twenty would be telling Zaa's people about their history, culture, customs, and traditions. And Jason had made it a point to offer one of those twenty positions to that Benga rigger that had come up against Kyva and lasted more than two seconds.

It hadn't been that hard to arrange, either. Benga were anything if not predictable, and the easiest way to secure their cooperation was to pay them, about ten times their usual annual salary, which they got to see added to their bank accounts thanks to the fact that the Kimdori already had their claws deep in the Syndicate's financial system. For nineteen of them, that was all it took, because they had no allegiance to anything but their own greed. But the rigger, who had at least some military discipline and pride, had to be convinced that the Confederation didn't want military secrets, they just wanted to learn about the Benga as a people. And that was the only reason why he agreed to it...though he certainly didn't say no to the money.

Lieutenant Gen Run Ba Ru, squadron commander in the Syndicate Navy Mecha Corps, his gestalt told him.

Over on E Chaio, Kraal was still gathering information and waiting for the Board to make a decision. They knew that they'd lost the Dreamer homeworld, and they were in quite a heated debate over what to do about it. Some of them wanted to just declare war and send the entire fleet to the Milky Way, but the smarter and more cautious members of the board, fully understanding that the Confederation had crossed over to Andromeda in a matter of *takirs* instead of years, wanted to learn more about the Confederation, its technology, and its goals before engaging them, and sure as hell didn't want to leave Andromeda undefended and allow the Confederation to rampage through the galaxy while their fleet was crossing flat space. And maybe three of them were against war period, arguing that they were going to be too busy dividing up the territory of the Consortium to get bogged down in a war with a new enemy. There were slaves to ogle, lands to admire, and money to count, and constant reports about this or that battle was going to ruin their fun. But Kraal had acquired enough information to feel confident to give a briefing about it, which was going to be tomorrow morning his time. What Kraal learned about the Syndicate's response was more or less going to dictate the Confederation's future plans.

That was going to be a *fun* conference for Jason, because it would be held on E Chaio. Jason had Rook build him a macro bionoid that would pass as a Benga, basically just his face and body type with Benga-shaped eyes and green skin, and the bionoid was already on E Chaio and waiting for him to merge to it. After the briefing, he was going to go take a look at

E Chaio personally under the guise of a common citizen, thanks to Kraal setting him up with a fake identity. He'd ride on the subways and trams like any other wage slave and see the heart of Syndicate society on their capitol planet with his own eyes.

Aya had no idea he planned to do that...mainly because she'd tell him no. She didn't consider him moving around in a bionoid to be any more safe than him moving around for real, because of the possibility he'd suffer dump shock if his bionoid was attacked and destroyed. The one and only way in which she'd relent was when it came to fighting in his Titan, because she knew she couldn't stop him anyway and had constant medical supervision on him to take care of him if he got shot down and suffered dump shock. So, since he knew she'd say no to his idea, he just wasn't going to tell her and endure the raging fit when he came home.

I'm not sure you'd like those, Jason warned without opening his eyes, sending in the manner that allowed non-telepaths to hear and being careful not to frame his sending, else the canine would have a hard time comprehending his thought. *Given you're a carnivore and all their flavorings are based on berries, I don't think you'd find them very tasty.* He opened his eyes and looked up at the giant animal, who just stared at him in return. *Or are you after the ice?*

He gave a snuffling sound.

"In that case, not a problem," he said aloud. *Ryn, you mind making some ice in the replicator, a really big bowl of it, and bringing it to me?*

Just a moment, Jason, she answered.

Thanks. "Someone's gonna bring you some," he promised. "I'm *far* too busy to do it myself," he added lightly, lifting a leg and crossing them at the ankles.

The giant wolf looked down at him in amusement, proving just how smart they were.

I'm almost afraid of what you need a bowl of ice for, babes, Myleena challenged playfully.

Nothing nefarious. One of the canines wants the ice. I think he likes the fact that it's so cold.

He was indeed just after the ice, because he was quite happy to enjoy the bowl of ice Ryn carried over and set down for him, finding the fact that it was so cold both exotic and enjoyable...at least until he gave himself brain freeze. The canines weren't used to cold, due to where they lived. Study of the meteorological data for the planet told him that it rarely snowed at this location, benefiting from an unusual wind pattern that kept the climate along this stretch of sub-tropical lowlands between the mountains and the sea at nearly a constant temperature no matter what season, much like Hawaii back on Terra. The wind tended to blow cool, dry air in from the mountains during the summer months, cooling off the area south of them more than usual given how deep into the sub-tropical zone it was, but the winds reversed in the winter to blow warm air in off the ocean to the south, drawing it all the way up from the tropical belt, warming up the land between the sea and the mountains to stave off what would normally be a very mild winter. That made the weather here quite delightful year-round, not too hot and not too cold, and made snow and ice a rarity that the wolves had maybe seen only once or twice in their lives. But the data did suggest that in the spring and fall, when the wind patterns were in the process of reversing, the area suffered strong storms as the warm air and cold air clashed along the shifting boundary.

That may be why the tree was planted here...because *something* was definitely going on. About a thousand shakra north of them, up on the top of the hill, the seed they planted wasn't a seed anymore. It was now a fucking *tree*, nearly thirty shakra tall and with a small canopy of fresh green leaves, which would turn golden after they aged. Two days, it had gone from a seed to *that*, which proved that the tree was in no way natural...or at least natural to Karinne science. To the Parri, and in a way to Jason, the tree was just doing what the tree was supposed to do. Grow. And grow quickly.

But that wasn't really his concern. The tree could handle its own business without him being there to babysit it, and after living so long with his own tree behind the house, he rather preferred living under the shade of an *oye* tree.

[Jason, the Red Horn architects just arrived, and they're on their way down,] Cori warned him. Her ship was still in orbit, doing a picket rotation with a CCM task force.

[Awesome. Why don't you hop down in a dropship, Cori, that way you can see their plans,] he replied as he sat up, lifting his sunglasses up to rest them over his hairline. He was feeling a tiny bit roasted now, since the planet here didn't absorb the UV radiation that made him tan, meaning that he could tan—and sunburn—here.

[That sounds intriguing. I'll send my bionoid down in a Wolf.]

[Just be careful where you land it, I don't want divots torn out of the grass.] Jys, the Red Horn guys are on their way down.

Nice, the steaks should be done not long after they finish, she predicted from where she was harassing Ayama, Surin, and Seido over at the grills... and there were three of the giant wolves over there, lured by the smell of the meat that they were preparing to grill. They'd learned quickly, however, that Seido brooked *no* interference to her cooking, not even when it was a hungry giant wolf that outweighed her ten times over and could kill her with a single snap of its jaws.

Shio were fucking *fearless* when it came to their cooking.

Cori arrived about five minutes before the dropship holding the architects did, opting to just have the Wolf hover over the ocean south of the meadow rather than have it land and get down using the internal grav engines inside her bionoid. Her bionoid was wearing a duty jumpsuit uniform rather than armor, and it was a faithful image of the hologram she used, wearing Jyslin's face and dominated by the color blue with her blue skin, blue hair nearly the same shade as her skin, and blue eyes. Her near obsession with that color was one of the ways she showed her individuality.

"Hey Cori," he said as she landed beside him, taking her hands and kissing her cheek in greeting. "What do you think?" he asked, turning to gesture out over the meadow.

"It's a lovely place, Jason," she replied, looking up at the giant wolf as it sniffed in her direction. The animals had already learned about bionoids, so she wasn't a surprise to it. "And I see the local population is welcoming."

"At least they are, they're as intelligent as Terrans and Faey," he chuckled. "We had a run-in with a very unhappy pair of birds this morning when Aran tried to climb down the rocks on the shore and take their nest."

“I dare say that would make them angry,” she agreed as the giant animal sniffed at her hair, nearly drawing it up into its nose. “Do you mind?” she asked it tersely.

“Something about bionoid hair makes them extra curious, Cori,” he chuckled. “Something about how it smells.”

“My hair is *not* food,” she told the giant animal indignantly, which made Jason burst out laughing.

Several of them gathered around the Makati when they got their presentation set up, and the three civil engineers showed them several concept holograms of the house, each a different architectural design, and not limited to Faey. One of them was a Terran design, and the sixth one was a *Shio* design. Jason was opting for a much larger, grander house here than the one at home, a vacation house meant to be a *vacation*, a place that was large and well equipped with a large manner of recreational equipment and a place that a galactic ruler wouldn’t think was a storage shed. It would be nearly six times the size of his house on the strip and built to cater to a Ducal family here with many guests to play rather than live, and in all six concept holograms, the large manor curved along with the coast and the hillside behind it like a crescent moon, fitting in with the lay of the land rather than changing it. Jason had made that a mandatory aspect of any design, that the house *fit in* with the meadow and the lay of the land. All of them also made sure the flat area near the center of the meadow along the coast would hold a large swimming pool, since there was no beach and thus no safe place to get down to the ocean to swim.

That rule had already been laid down; *no swimming in the ocean*. The shore was too rocky, the waves too powerful, the rocky shoreline was the nesting ground of sea birds as Aran had learned that morning and thus wasn’t to be disturbed, and there was a very strong current that flowed just offshore that would drag any swimmer to the west if they got into it. It was far too dangerous, especially for the kids.

“Ohhh, I really like this one,” Jyslin said, pointing at the second hologram from the left. The central part of the house in that design was dominated by huge windows that looked out over the ocean. And naturally, it was one of the three Faey designs, with a flat roof on the wings that

would serve as recreational space, where the main part of the house had an arched roof.

“All six have everything you asked for in their design,” one of the Makati told them. “The only way they differ is aesthetics and floorplans.”

“You’ll have to add in something to the plan,” Jason said as one of the giant wolves lowered his nose between Jason and Jyslin and looked curiously at the holograms. “I promised these guys a den of sorts. A sheltered area against the house where they can get out of the rain when they’re here.”

“That’s easy enough to add to the design,” the tallest of them answered. “We can simply cover the eastern edge of the building and build something suitable for them. That area of the grounds is set aside for the maintenance building and landing pad, so it would fit quite nicely there between the main house and the landing pad. You’d be walking past it going back and forth to the landing pad. Maybe enclose it in an airskin shield and provide temperature control. Are they all that big?”

“More or less. There’s five of them,” he answered, reaching up and over and scrubbing his fingers into the fur of the giant animal’s neck. “They won’t be living at the house, but it’s in their territory, so it’s only courteous of us as neighbors to give them someplace nice to rest when they come to visit.”

“I completely understand, your Grace. We can do that, no problem,” the Makati nodded. Most Makati that worked at Red Horn had long ago gotten used to the fact that Jason Karinne wasn’t the usual client. That he wanted a large resting area for giant wolves as part of his house design was just him being him. “As far as the house goes, all designs incorporate fourteen bedrooms, twenty full baths, and all the requested recreational facilities. Indoor multi-function sports court, gym, batchi training facility, game rooms, spa, musical conservatory large enough to hold performances, holo theater, merge facility with space for twenty merge pods, three separate kitchens and a large outdoor kitchen and grilling area, and so on and so on. there will also be barracks and security command center for the Imperial Guard and a small annex clinic for the Medical Service inside the house. Outside, the main feature will be the swimming pool, but there will also be an outdoor sports field, a putting green and driving area, a recreational

vehicle garage, and an exercise yard with stable capable of holding ten mount animals. Utility wise, we designed a landing pad, mecha garrison building to hold two Titans, four Juggernauts, four Knights, four Gladiators, ten combat hoverbikes, and four Wolf fighters as requested, power generation building, environmental reclamation facility so the compound has no impact on the local environment, and there will be a bunker built under the house for emergencies. The area will also have four concealed heavy pulse ground batteries and a hard shield generator that will form a dome we project will be large enough to enclose the *oye* tree when it reaches its full size. That will protect quite a large area, well beyond the meadow itself. The entire compound will take up most of the meadow with the house and recreational on the south side, by the shore, and the mecha garrison building and infrastructure buildings on the north side, on the other side of the hill holding the tree, which puts it both close to the house and also out of direct sight. That leaves the vast majority of the meadow, particularly the hill holding the tree, untouched and in its natural state, as you requested.”

“We’re going with this one,” Jyslin declared, pointing at the hologram she favored.

“Hey, don’t I get a say here?” Jason protested.

“Sure you do, but if it’s anything other than what I want, you’re going to have a very bad home life until you cave in,” she replied, which made several of them laugh. “Besides, you see anything wrong with this one? It’s *gorgeous*.”

“Well, not really.”

“Then we go with number two,” Jyslin declared firmly, smiling down at the Makati.

“Your Grace?” the Makati asked.

Quite a bit of muted giggling filled the few seconds of silence, then he shrugged. “Fine,” he acquiesced. “It *is* nice, just not sure about all the windows.”

“I think you’ll enjoy the Duchess’ choice the first time you get to experience the view from those windows, your Grace,” the Makati said

confidently. “Besides, since they point out to sea and this moon is mostly uninhabited, who’s going to look in at you?”

He looked down at the red-skinned Makati, then gave a sudden laugh. “That’s a point,” he agreed, then he looked over at Jyslin. “But you’re forgetting who *really* gets to decide,” he said, pointing at Rann. Or more the point, pointing at the tiny vulpar in his arms. “You okay with number two, Amber?” he asked.

She gave an enthusiastic yip.

“Then we go with number two,” he declared. “Guess she likes the windows, too.”

She agreed with that with another yip.

“That reminds me, guys, remember we have a vulpar, so the doors have to have the same features the ones in my house do,” he told them. “She has to be able to open them.”

“Vulpar protocols,” one of the Makati chuckled. “We already included that in our technical designs.”

“Where is Twilight, anyway?” Shya asked, looking around. She then gave a sudden fearful look. “I hope one of them didn’t eat her!”

The huge canine gave Shya a flat, indignant look.

“She’s right there, goofball,” Kyri said, pointing. The tabi was chasing a small rodent across the meadow and getting quite the workout. The tiny rodent ran just as fast as she did, so she really had to work to keep up with it. “Why does she even do that? She’s not gonna eat it.”

“She’s just playing,” Jason replied.

“I don’t think the mouse is having much fun,” Jyslin mused.

“She won’t hurt it if she catches it,” he shrugged in reply. “That would be depriving herself of a toy.”

“So, when will it be ready?” Tim asked. “I already got some plans for this place.”

“We’ll have the house ready in two takirs after we make the final changes to the plans,” one of the Makati said confidently. “The other parts

of the compound will take a little longer, particularly the military asset hangar on the north side of the property. We estimate total construction time at 32 days.”

“Sounds like we can celebrate winning the Empress’ Crown right here,” Jyslin grinned.

“My, we’re confident,” Jason teased lightly.

“We’re winning it this year, baby!” she nearly shouted. “We’re favored to reach the finals!”

“That’s what I call the kiss of death.”

“You just wait. Watch our girls blow the Rampage off the pitch!” The Marindia Rampage were the Paladins’ first opponent in the playoffs, and they’d be playing them tomorrow. The Paladins, as the first seed in their side of the bracket, got to play the lowest seed in the bracket, the 8 seed Rampage. There were 16 teams in the playoffs separated into two brackets, the eight division champions and the eight teams with the best records that didn’t win their division, so the Paladins had to win three playoff games to reach the finals. Divisions I and V were on the other side of the bracket, so that put the Draconis Immortals and the Tamiri Tigers potentially out of their way until the championship game...for five more years. Every ten years, the IBL randomly changed the bracket layouts so the same teams didn’t constantly face off against each other, so the brackets would change in 4410.

“And don’t forget the bet,” Symone added eagerly.

“I’m sure Yila’s sweating right now,” Myri laughed. “The Tigers are the two seed on the other side. The Immortals took the top seed from them on the last day of the regular season, and they have to play each other to reach the finals. And do it on the Immortals’ home pitch. That’s a rough road to travel.”

“That just gives us a better chance to win it all,” Jyslin said smugly. “Whoever does survive that bracket’s gonna be so beat up that we’ll just stomp them in the championship game.”

“I estimate we can start construction in three days, and then 32 after that, it’ll be ready. Just in time for the championship game,” the Makati

chuckled.

“Oh yeah, there’s one thing you have to tell your crews,” Jason said after the alpha canine nudged him. “Part of our deal with these guys is we feed them during construction, since the noise will scare away their prey. So budget in enough meat to feed five guys this size twice a day while you’re doing the work. Say, about sixty konn of raw meat per day for every day you’re on site.”

The Makati looked up at the massive canine, then gave a nod. “I’ll make sure to emphasize that to the Master Builder taking the project,” he assured them.

“That much? It’s gonna make ‘em fat,” Jyslin chuckled.

“Hey, I promised them food, they’re getting food,” he replied firmly. “I want the construction time to be *their* vacation. No need to hunt while we’re banging around in our machines and raising a ruckus, just kick back and relax and let us do our thing.”

They went over a few minor details with the plans, then the three Makati got back on their dropship and headed back to Karis, letting the Ducal family and their friends get back to relaxing. Jason went back to his beach blanket and enjoyed some quiet time, though his kids came over and interrupted his naps a few times. It was while he was with Aran that the outside interrupted his quiet time again, them laying on the blanket and him explaining how grav engines worked to his scientifically-inclined young son as he pointed at a KMS fleet battleship in orbit, which was visible in the blue sky overhead. Both of them were wearing a zooming visor, so they got a much better view of the ship. Zoom visors could magnify up to 120x, and on a fleet battleship, that was close enough to see features on the hull.

[Ohhh, so the ship kinda moves space itself?]

[Sort of. The engine is like a zip line. Remember the zip lines at the water park?]

[Yeah.]

[The engine is the handle array and space is the rope. The engine slides along space, pushing itself by rolling over the rope. At least ours do. Most

other empires use a different kind of grav engine. Our engines are called translation engines, while most everyone else uses differential engines.]

[How do those work?]

[By changing gravity in a small area so much that the ship the engine is in moves with the gravity inside the engine instead of the gravity outside,] he answered. [In effect, the ship “falls” in whichever direction the engine wants to go, where our engine kind of pushes itself along the fabric of space.]

[Oh. Ohhhh, I get it!]

[I knew you would. You are a very smart boy, son,] Jason smiled over at him. Jason took control of Aran’s zoom visor and fixed the image on another ship in orbit. [That right there is a KT-2K freighter, bringing in the possessions of the Dreamers,] he added. [They’re big enough to see from the ground, at least if it was closer. That freighter is the size of a KMS heavy cruiser. Looks like it came in from the Stargate and it’s heading for the Dreamer settlements, which puts it on a vector that makes it little more than a dot in the sky without magnification. And that right there is a KPS-1260, it’s bringing Dreamers from Nexus One down to the surface, so they can move into their new houses.]

[Neat. I wonder if they’re all as great as Aria.]

[The ones I’ve met so far have been very kind,] he said. [But you can’t judge an entire people by just the one you’ve met.]

[Jason,] Cybi called. Her bionoid was with them on Tir Tairngire, along with the other CBIMs and Coma, but her commune came from Karis, from her core crystal.

[Yeah?]

[Dahnai is demanding passage to Tir Tairngire, to come to you. And it seems she has several council members with her,] she communed. [They want to confer, and they know Dahnai can get them there.]

[Who?]

[Kreel, Krirara, Holikk, Voss, Quord, Magran, Master Mo, and Prime Altra. But Ami Ji is also with them.]

[Ami Ji? That's a surprise.] Ji, or Ami Ji if one used his title, was the ruler of the Kyai empire, a neutral observer empire in the Confederation. They were one of the neighbors of the Imxi that the Confederation had contacted since conquering them, and they had joined the council as neutral observers not long after. The Kyai were a tiny empire of fifteen planets, moons, or colonies spread across three systems who had technology a good two hundred years behind the Confederation, but that didn't really matter. There were "empires" in the Confederation that only claimed one star system either as full members or neutral observers like the Zyagya, Kimdori, Moridon, and the Imbiri.

The Kyai themselves were a curious people. They were humanoid, like several Confederation members, but their claim to fame was that they were *winged*, like the Imbiri. That was where the similarity ended, however. The Kyai were very tall, as tall as Keelo, and their wings were very large and membranous, like a bat's wings, the membrane attached to their backs from the wings just over the shoulder blades all the way down to their hips, ending at the border between their lower back and rear end. They were the closest things to the old pictures of succubi in the Confederation, because they were a very attractive humanoid species...they just had large leathery wings on their backs. They were hexapeds like the Imxi, but their second set of upper limbs had evolved into wings. And those wings were large enough for them to fly on their home planet, which was both .73 gravity and had a 5.9 pressure atmosphere, right on the edge of high-pressure classification, which was conducive to winged propulsion. Low gravity and high pressure meant a Kyai's wings had much more lift than in other environments, and with them being a low gravity species, they tended to be tall. The Kyai couldn't fly in standard gravity, restricted only to gliding, but Confederation technology fixed that with inducers, which they were happy to sell to the Kyai along with a bunch of other Confederation-standard tech. So long as a Kyai had an inducer, they could fly off their home planet. As a people, the Kyai were pleasant enough, but a bit suspicious...years of dealing with the Imxi was the reason for that. Jason was sure they'd join the Confederation as full members in a few more years, once they were convinced that the Confederation was what it said it was.

They had many of the same problems as the Imbiri when it came to fashion, however. Mesaiima couldn't really wear shirts or much of anything

on her upper body except wraps and bikini-style garments because of her wings, and the Kyai had the same problem. So, they had remarkably similar fashion customs as the Keelo, where both males and females went bare-chested, tattooing was a common practice to adorn the bare skin on their bodies, and since the climate of their home planet was tropical, like Shio Prime, they usually only wore loincloths or shorts, and would never wear any garment that went below the knees. Their religion also forbade them from wearing shoes, for some weird reason, so they were always barefoot. Then again, with those claws on their feet, wearing shoes might be problematic. Their toes were much longer than usual for a humanoid, were very dexterous, and their toenails had evolved into small but fairly formidable claws for gripping perches and snatching objects off the ground while flying. Kyai toes had nearly as much manual dexterity as human fingers, able to grip and manipulate objects, they just lacked an opposable digit, so their toes couldn't operate as a second set of hands.

[He's here in person rather than a bionoid, so I think he wants to get a look at Tir Tairngire with his own senses.]

[Probably. The other thing I need to pass on is that Myri, Lorna, and Miaari want to talk to you.]

[About time,] he answered. [Where are they?]

[KMS HQ.]

[Awesome. I'll jump in my office bionoid and get down there.] He sat up. *I need to jump over to the White House for a bit, so I'll be out of it,* he warned everyone. *Aya, do me a favor and put a shade up over me so I don't get sunburn.*

He didn't wait for an answer, he leaned back and closed his eyes, then sent his consciousness across thousands of light years, returning it back to Karis. He found his office bionoid and merged to it, then felt its sensor mesh activate, flooding him with very organic-seeming senses. He fluttered his eyes open and stepped out of the alcove in the bedroom of his office that held the bionoid, which was wearing a tee shirt and jeans. *[Chirk, I'm in my bionoid and coming out. Unlock the door,]* he warned her, communing with her interface.

[It will be unlocked by the time you reach it, Revered hive-leader.]

He made his way down to the military command center, a few floors down from his office, and found Myri and Miaari standing side by side at the main holo console, and Lorna was walking up to join them. “Ladies,” he called as he walked towards them. “Tell me you found them.”

“We found most of them,” Miaari answered as he reached the console. They had a stargate of a section of Andromeda up, he could tell from the system identification codes. “Denmother estimates nearly ten thousand Dreamers were taken to this planet, V3ÄE-31. It’s a remote system deep into the galaxy holding a major Syndicate military base, as well as one of their major shipbuilding operations. They represent the vast majority of the Dreamers removed from the moon. The planet is most similar to Makan in the Imperium, semi-arid, low gravity, low pressure, oxygen atmosphere, and is mostly devoid of civilian population. The Syndicate prefers to have their major military operations on planets and moons dedicated to it. In effect, the entire planet is a military base, and its primary mission is to support the shipbuilding docks in orbit around the planet. That makes it a very good place to put the Dreamers, at least from their point of view.”

“So, going after this planet both gets back most of the Dreamers taken from the moon and lets us take a bite out of their shipbuilding operations,” Jason mused. “Plus it lets us hide the real reason we’re attacking behind going after their docks. What kind of resistance are we looking at?”

“Significant, but nowhere near as many as what were at the Dreamer’s moon,” she answered. “The Consortium attacked this system several times during the war, but never succeeded in taking it. It has nearly five thousand ships permanently picketed in the system as defense, another six thousand ships from the Dreamer retreat are currently in orbit there as well, and there are also the assets on and around the planet, primarily orbital defense platforms, ground to space defenses, and military mecha.”

“Bottom line it, Generals. Can the KMS and INS take this system by themselves? I’m not sure if any other empire would support another military operation so soon after taking the Dreamer homeworld. Getting engaged in a protracted war with the Syndicate wasn’t what any of us signed up for, but they knew that we’d be going after the Dreamers the Syndicate managed to get off the moon. I’ll ask, but I’m not going to depend on anyone but us.”

“With a good plan, yes,” Myri answered. “The staff is already working on it.”

“So is mine, at least my Imperium staff,” Lorna nodded. “I won’t involve the CCM until the council approves the operation.”

“The council can’t say anything about us going in on our own,” Myri chuckled. “The articles of war they approved gives individual empires the right to conduct military operations as part of the general war effort. We only need council approval if we request CCM assistance.”

“We would get that easily,” Lorna said calmly. “That’s a simple majority, and enough empires would give their blessing to the KMS and INS to go after the Syndicate on our own, with only non-combat support from the CCM. It does their work for them and doesn’t risk their own assets.”

“Where are they holding the Dreamers, Mee?”

“Here,” she replied, zooming in the hologram and pointing at what looked like a large town. “This is a military exercise billeting area. Thousands of dorms that are used by army and Marine soldiers for on-planet training exercises. They’ve just finished the process of moving the Dreamers into the dorms, and put heavy guard around them. This is an opportunity, cousin. They have them all in one place.”

“One we can’t let slip away,” he nodded, to which both Myri and Lorna also nodded in assent. “But we also can’t just rush in with so much defense there. Mee, ask Zaa to set up an SCM screen. Let’s interdict the system so they can’t move anything in or out. And to hide our true purpose, let’s do the same thing at a dozen other major Syndicate military systems. Let’s make it look like we’re trying to lock down their Navy to keep them from moving. The fact that those shipbuilding docks are there will make them jump to the wrong conclusion when we do the same thing at five or six other shipbuilding docks and major Navy bases. Find the systems with the biggest shipbuilding operations and where the most Naval ships are stationed and prepare plans to interdict them. Not only does that hide what we’re really doing, it *does* take those Naval assets off their board. Those are ships we don’t have to fight later.”

“Smart,” Lorna said with an approving look at him. “That will give us time to come up with a good plan to take the planet. And with the interdictor up, they can’t move the Dreamers on us.”

“Exactly,” he nodded, raising his head and looking up at a camera. “That reminds me. Cyra, what’s the ETA on Nexus Three and Nexus Four?”

“Nexus Three should be complete in four days by current projection,” Cyra’s voice called over a speaker. *“Nexus Four should be complete in six days.”*

“Four days? It took just three of us two days to build Nexus One.”

“Along with an army of maintenance bionoids. And cutting every corner you could find,” Cyra retorted. *“To safely complete Nexus Three, it will take four days.”*

“Burn,” Jason grumbled, which made Myri chuckle.

“What do you need them for?” Lorna asked.

Jason glanced at Miaari, who gave him a slight nod. “We’re going to use them to go after the Oracles on enemy super-ships, the way we got Aria,” he answered. “Kimdori infiltrators are already hunting them down. When they find a ship with an Oracle, they call us in, and we use a nexus bridge to invade the ship and take the Oracle. We were going to use Nexus Two to do it, but we pulled that out of the plan to link it to Nexus One. I had them accelerate production of the other two nexus bridges.”

“And which of those is the one you’re letting the CCM use?”

“Nexus Five, and I don’t know when it’ll be finished,” he answered.

“Nine days,” Cyra supplied. *“We’ll be moving it to Terra as soon as it’s ready for operation.”*

“Just put your foot down with it, Lorna. Half the council wants to use it as a personal taxi service,” Jason warned.

“We’ll let them play with it, but only between scheduled operations,” she assured him. “Are you going to set up permanent bridges the way you’re using One and Two?”

He shook his head. "They're not cost-effective enough to use commercially like that," he answered. "I don't think you want to see the bill I'm running up keeping Nexus One and Two linked together. The only reason we're doing it is because we have to, not because we want to."

"Well, the technology is still new, nephew. I'm sure you'll make it much more economical with more research," Lorna told him with a smile.

"That's about all we needed to tell you, Jayce," Myri told him. "I'll have Cyra keep you apprised of any changes."

"That sounds like a dismissal, Myri," he accused.

"We're busy, so shoo," she said, making a waving motion with her hand, which made him laugh.

"I still have my corner," he countered.

"Not today you don't. Take your bionoid back to your office before I have Cybi delink you."

"Touchy, touchy," he teased. "Admit it, you want my bionoid in here so you can molest it while I'm not merged to it."

"I can just go up to your office to do that," she snorted, which made Lorna laugh. "Oh, and take some pictures of where you are, I'm curious."

"Cyra can access the survey footage Red Horn made using camera pods," he told her. "It lets you see the whole meadow and coastline."

"Nice, we'll take a look at it when we finish here," Lorna said.

In the time it took him to get his bionoid back in the office and delink, Dahnai and the others managed to get to Tir Tairngire. Dahnai's skimmer was landing on a temporary pad at the edge of the meadow when Jason opened his eyes and sat back up, noting that Aran had gotten bored enough to wander off. *Warn the others not to annoy the wolves*, he warned Dahnai. *We made a deal with them.*

How? Did you talk to them?

No, their minds are developed enough for most telepaths to understand their thoughts, he replied. *They just have naturally closed minds, like many canine species we've encountered, so we didn't realize it right away.*

I can send to them? Seriously?

Sure, try it for yourself. Just keep in mind they don't have a rational language, so it's like dealing with someone who doesn't speak a language in common with you.

Oh, cool. There was a long pause. Cool! They understand!

Told you. So tell the others to kindly not freak out about them wandering the compound. They're perfectly safe. Oh, and close the hatch when you leave, they'll try to get in. They're very curious.

She answered with pure mirth, and he stood up and started walking towards her dropship. Several white-armored guards exited the skimmer first, and then Dahnai came out of the hatch with Sirri right behind her. She was wearing a white bikini top and a pair of very short shorts, and Sirri was topless as usual with a pair of Faey workout shorts and a pair of Faey running shoes. Behind them were nearly a dozen rulers from the Council, several close friends and a few that Jason didn't know very well. Krirara, Kreel, Magran, Quord, and Holikk were old friends on the council, Voss and Altra were rulers with whom he had amiable relations, and Master Mo and Ami Ji were rulers he didn't know very well. All of them were dressed very casually—or not at all in Krirara's case—meaning that this wasn't meant to look like business on its face. Jason advanced to greet them as the alpha giant wolf padded over, and the two of them met the others as Dahnai's guards spread out across the meadow to join Aya's squad. “Hey love,” Jason said, kissing Dahnai on the cheek. “Welcome to Tir Tairngire,” he said to the others.

“I see the tree's sprouted already, and then some,” Kreel said, looking up the hill.

“That's why we planted it in this spot,” Jason replied. “I know Dahnai warned you, but I'll warn you again. The wolves won't bother you, so don't worry about them. They're intelligent enough to send to them, so we've worked out a deal with them. They're letting me build a vacation house here in their territory in exchange for us giving them food when they come around. We've agreed to be friendly neighbors.”

“A fair bargain for any wild animal,” Krirara mused, looking up at the giant white-furred canine.

“They’re canines, but it’s not really fair to call them wild animals,” Jason said. “They’re easily as smart as most of us. They just apply that intelligence in a different way. In fact, keep in mind that they learn very fast. They’ve already picked up quite a bit of Faey just by listening to us. They can’t talk, but keep in mind they very well may understand what you say,” he warned with a smile.

The giant wolf snuffled audibly.

“Not every intelligent race in the universe is a humanoid,” Magran said sagely.

The guards erected a pavilion of sorts that was in the skimmer’s cargo hold, set out chairs and a table, and the small group of rulers sat down and discussed some real matters. They discussed the Dreamer operation, the resettlement operation to move them to their new home, and to his relief, they discussed future military operations from the viewpoint of there needing to be future operations. “I have the Fatherland’s finest drilling for action, and they’ll be ready as soon as the Kindori track down the Dreamers that the Syndicate spirited off the moon,” Quord announced. “From what I recall the Denmother saying, quite a large number were taken off the moon before the interdictor covered the system.”

“Since you mentioned it, they’ve found about ten thousand of them,” Jason said, projecting a hologram over the table using his interface, a holo of the system. “On this planet. I’ve already ordered Myri to start planning an operation to take them back, which will require an operation similar to the one we used on the Dreamer homeworld. Naval supremacy followed up by a ground assault, but I think Myri only plans to take enough ground for us to evacuate the Dreamers, so the ground attack will be focused, and we just blockade the rest of the planet. You know, shoot anything down that tries to take off, but take no other action. From what Lorna said, she’ll be proposing a CCM operation to take the planet as soon as she has a basic plan to present to the Council. But even if they vote it down, between the KMS and the INS, we have the ships and the forces to take those Dreamers back.”

“I’m so glad you’re assigning my ships to your operation, babes,” Dahnai said tartly, which made Kreel laugh.

“Talk to Lorna, Dahnai. She’s the one that told me that the INS was going. I guess you gave her prior permission to deploy INS assets without your approval.”

“Oh, Lorna approved it? That’s different,” she said dismissively.

“You’ll have more than the INS going in with you, Jayce,” Kreel assured him. “The Union will help. We sure as Grimji’s whiskers don’t want the Syndicate to have even a single Dreamer under their pads, or we’ll just be in this same situation again as soon as they breed up enough Oracles to replace the ones we liberate from them.”

“That is a pointed truth, and why the Fatherland will assist in taking back those Dreamers,” Quord agreed.

“As will the Kirri,” Krirara nodded. “The key to forcing the Syndicate into a lasting peace is to take the Dreamers away from them.”

“That is the key phrase here, my friends. Lasting peace,” Magran said. “The Colonies will support another CCM operation, because as the Moderator so succinctly put it, we will never get a lasting peace with the Syndicate so long as they have the Oracles. The moment they predict a victory in a future war, the Syndicate would break the peace treaty and go to war.”

“Given the base nature of the Benga, I believe the Grand Master sees the truth of it,” Ji agreed. “Their greed would drive them to war if they felt they would profit from it.”

“That just about sums up everything we’ve learned about the Benga,” Kreel said without much humor, leaning back in his chair and putting his padded feet up on the table.

Ji glanced to the side. “I still find myself staring,” he said, mainly to himself. Jason followed his eyes, to where Cybi was playing with Bethany and Siyae. One of the wolves was standing almost right over them, her face curious, trying to puzzle out the meaning of the game.

“At the dog, or what?” Kreel asked.

“The CBIM,” he answered. “I find myself in deep debate every time it’s in the room as to exactly what it is.”

“She’s a member of my family, Ji,” Jason chuckled. “All the self-aware biogenic units are.”

He leaned a little closer. “Have you ever considered the possibility that they might malfunction and turn against your people?”

“Only when I first found Cybi and didn’t understand her,” he answered. “There was an old movie from my world that had a line that went something like ‘life is not a malfunction.’ I don’t remember which movie it was, but I do remember that line.”

“And you don’t have concerns over creating more and more of them?”

The others looked at him seriously, and he realized that this must be a subject that came up quite a bit when he wasn’t around. “Not really. Outside of Rook, who’s something of a one in a billion fluke, it takes a massive amount of effort to build a biogenic system complex enough to be self-aware, so no, I’m not going to build thousands of Cybis. We have plans to build two more CBIMs and one more CBMOM, and that’s it. The continents of Hirga and Sarga need CBIMs, and we’re going to refit the *Aegis* with a CBMOM. And that will be the official end of the active CB program. It’ll go on standby unless something tragic happens and we have to build another command-level biogenic unit, or we have to build another fleet flagship. It takes a CBMOM to run a fleet flagship.”

“So, you don’t intend to build spare units and have them in storage?”

“You can’t really store a core crystal that makes up something like a CBIM, Ji,” he answered. “We carefully schedule things so the core crystal is put into service within hours after being finished. If we don’t, then the crystal decays and becomes corrupted, and a year’s worth of work and a few hundred million credits get wasted.”

“And there are no safeguards in case one goes berserk?”

“Not really,” he shrugged. “Well, outside of the other CBIMs. If one CBIM went rogue, the others could bring her to heel. The way they’re connected into Karis’ planetary network doesn’t allow any one CBIM to control everything. Well, one can control everything, but it can’t lock the other CBIMs out.”

“Her. You say her. Is it not just a machine?”

All of them gave Ji an amused look. “Talk to Cybi for ten minutes, and the fact that she’s a *she* is abundantly clear if you’re familiar with Faey, Ji,” Dahnai told him. “Don’t forget Cylan either. He’s a CBIM, but he’s *male*. Rook is also male. They identify as a gender, and trust me, they act like the gender they declare. Cylan is as much a male as Cybi is a female.”

“I thought that was programmed into them,” Master Mo mused.

“No, we don’t program gender,” Jason said. “My computer experts and several psychologists are actively researching it, though. They find it fascinating that their core crystals have a gender, and that we have nothing to do with it.”

“Psychologists researching a computer?”

“A computer with emotions and a defined personality, Mo,” Jason reminded him. “Cybi and Cyra may both be computers, but they’re nothing alike. Cybi’s had over a thousand years to develop her personality, which you can tell was affected by her centuries of being on Karis alone, trying to clean up the radiation left behind when the planet was destroyed. Cyra’s the oldest of the new CBIMs, and that’s more than long enough for her to develop her own personality, which is nothing like Cybi’s. And Cyvanne acts nothing like Cyra, Cylan acts nothing like Cyvanne, Cynna acts nothing like Cylan, Cyrsi acts nothing like Cynna.”

“Amen to that,” Dahnai chuckled.

“Each one of them is unique, which further proves to just about everyone that they aren’t just machines. Like I said, they’re part of my family, as much as my wife or children. That’s why Cybi is here playing with the girls, she adores them and often babysits them when my house servants are busy. Which is much easier now thanks to the bionoids,” he chuckled. “I’ve seen a definite change in Cybi since Rook started the bionoid program. The ability to hold the girls, touch them, hug them, to feel them hug her back the way we can, it’s had a profound effect on her. Sometimes I think Cybi all but thinks she’s their second mother. And I certainly never have to look far to find a babysitter when I need one,” he mused with a smile, watching Cybi and the girls. The female wolf had finally decided to intrude herself in the game, which had turned it into a whole lot of gentle pawing, licking, and giggling. The girls were the size of

a newborn cub to the wolves, and the gentleness the female demonstrated in playing with them showed that she understood how delicate they were compared to her.

“Well, that proves you really trust those giant dogs,” Kreel noted lightly.

“Just send to them, dip,” Jason told him. “I told you, you can understand their thoughts. Well, as long as you keep things basic.”

The serious discussion was forgotten when Seido started serving them steaks from the grill for everyone but Kreel, who got roasted Menodan sugar chutes and grilled thick-cut slices of *boaru* instead, which were huge vegetables that tasted similar to sweet potatoes. For a Grimja, sugar chutes and *boaru* were grill fare. And it said a lot about the readiness of his servants that they brought Grimja food with them on the trip, just in case Kreel crashed the party...which was something he loved to do.

Seriously, there was an entire shelf in the pantry and a section of the second refrigerator dedicated to Kreel’s favorite foods in his house. And the wine cellar almost always had a keg of Makati ale ready to tap.

After eating, the rulers decided to avail themselves of the outing and relax a little. They spread out to explore the meadow and surrounding forest, and Ji decided to go on a short flight to get a lay of the land, which he could do here thanks to the inducer he was wearing. Jason had to watch in amusement as Rann, Shya, and the older kids were playing...but playing the way Generations played. They’d recently discovered the *Avatar: the Last Airbender* cartoons on Terra TV, and they were by the rocky shoreline pretending to be benders...and making a convincing case of it by using telekinesis to mimic the powers of the characters from the cartoon. It was in a situation like that where Zachary shined the brightest, showing off his incredible skill and power with telekinesis, pulling a massive column of seawater up from the ocean and flinging it around like a water bender from the cartoon. Kyri, still holding the arrogance of her power, wasn’t about to let Zach upstage her when she was supposed to be the strongest and showed off something Jason didn’t entirely want others to know they could do. She ignited the air itself using her TK to produce fire, then manipulated it to control its shape and movement. In effect, pretending to be a fire bender, but revealing to the rulers that she could produce pyrokinetic effects with her power.

You put that out this instant, young lady! Dahnai snapped mentally, her thought adamant and shimmering with parental authority. *You do not play with fire!*

Do as she says, Jason backed up, giving her a scowl.

“I see they’re learning faster than I expected,” Magran mused. “The work of the Pai?”

“Yes, we convinced a Pai to come to Karis to teach us, and I’m not liking what Mrar is teaching them,” Jason grunted aloud in a dark voice. “I think I need to sit in on those sessions for a few days.”

“I watched the viddy of the Pai Masters at the Academy. I didn’t think most of that was even possible,” he said reverently.

“Mrar stuns me on a daily basis when I take lessons from her,” he agreed with a nod. “What the Pai can do with TK, it just boggles the mind. I’d swear it was magic if I didn’t know the science behind it.”

“Still, that was quite impressive,” Magran said in admiration. “I’ve seen pyrokinesis, but only in videos. Your daughter is quite gifted, Jason.”

“Thank you, but she needs to learn how to not show off,” he grouched, which made Magran chuckle.

“May as well ask a *mailaka* not to bloom,” he said lightly. “I’ve heard rumors that the Pai will petition for entry.”

“Denmother thinks they will, them and the Muri,” he nodded. “I’ll be happy to see it. Both of them have a lot to offer.”

“The Muri shouldn’t be underestimated,” Magran said. “The Pai may overshadow them with their telekinesis, but the Muri’s psionic gifts make them very, very formidable.”

“I’m glad I’m not the only one that sees their potential,” Jason said with a nod of agreement and respect to his shorter friend.

Kreel wandered over to them, throwing an arm over each of them...up for Jason, down for Magran. “There’s too much to see and do here to stand around and talk!” he declared. “Let’s get a couple of airbikes down here and go explore! You can ride with me, Magran,” he grinned.

“I’m fully capable of driving an airbike, Kreel,” Magran retorted smoothly. “I had quite an adventurous youth, you know.”

“I thought all you Grand Masters just became old and dusty the moment you put on the robe,” he teased, then wheezed when Magran elbowed him.

“Jason, have them bring down some racing airbikes,” Magran said, almost frostily.

“Ooh, that sounds like a challenge, Grand Master,” Kreel teased.

“Why don’t you get on the other one and find out, Kreel?” Magran retorted. “And I think a friendly wager on the outcome of the race will properly motivate us to do our best.”

Jason had to laugh. “Any particular model you want?”

“Ablu Yot MC-177s if you have them available,” he replied.

Jason gave Magran an admiring look. That was a *professional’s* airbike, powerful and agile. “I can dig up a few and have them brought over,” he promised.

Jason learned not long after that exchange that he wasn’t the only galactic ruler with talents gained from a misspent youth. Quite simply, Magran was a *racing god* on an airbike. Jason had watched pro airbike races, and the way Magran moved with the bike, the way he handled it, there was no doubt that he’d raced either as a hardcore amateur or a semi-pro at some time in his life. He left Kreel in his airwake at the start, and the Grimja never so much as had a chance after that. Their four lap race around the forest, around floating pylons that marked the race course, ended with Magran threatening to lap Kreel as they came out of the last turn, the Grimja doing everything he could to keep that humiliation from coming about, so it *almost* looked like Kreel was in the lead and trying to keep Magran from passing him. The truth was, Kreel was just trying to save what little remained of his dignity after getting just blown up by the deceptively mild Colonist.

After the spanking was dished out, the two of them landed by where everyone was watching, and there were quite a few surprised faces. Dahnai summed it up with a laugh, patting Magran on the back when he landed. “Where did you learn to ride like that?” she demanded.

“I earned my living while in Academy on a racing bike,” he replied, giving Kreel a nearly smug look. “Three years on the Exeven Planetary pro circuit, six wins, nineteen top five finishes, fifty finishes in the purse bracket, meaning I earned a share of the purse from the race. I made more than enough to live very comfortably while I was in Academy. Where everyone else in Academy was living at home or in assigned quarters, I lived in a very nice corner apartment just blocks from campus and had a luxury hovercar and racing airbike. I gave up racing after meeting the Grand Master in person quite by accident when he visited the Academy and was so inspired by him that I entered civil service after graduation. I stopped racing altogether not long afterward, since such flamboyant hobbies aren’t considered proper for a civil servant, who is supposed to be humble and modest both in his service to the Colonies and in his private life. If it hadn’t been for my parents’ insistence that I finish my education and a chance encounter with the Grand Master, I’d probably still be racing, and my life would have turned out very differently. A strange path I walked, I feel sometimes. I started my adulthood in the saddle of a racing airbike with dreams of making it to the Interplanetary circuit, and I ended up wearing the Grand Master’s robe. Fate is a fickle thing,” he chuckled.

Jason just had to laugh. He was right, Magran *did* ride like a pro... because he was one!

“I declare the bet invalid, you’re a ringer!” Kreel laughed. “And who knew a Colonist would hustle someone!”

“Every species has their scoundrels, Kreel,” Magran said mildly, which made virtually every adult explode in laughter.

Daira, 4 Miraa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Wednesday, 5 February 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

Daira, 4 Miraa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne Historical Reference Calendar

Madra Bal Glassworks, Maju Raki City, E Chaio (VIFB-01-2)

He could only hope that this went as well as the batchi match did.

Jyslin's confidence hadn't been misplaced, but it wasn't the trouncing she had predicted. When it came to the playoffs in just about any professional sport, records didn't matter, heart did, and the Rampage showed a lot of heart in the game. They still lost, it was clear the Paladins were the better team, but they made it far closer than it could have been by coming back in the fourth division down six goals and pulling within one. But that seemed to wake up the Paladins, and they pulled back out to a four goal lead, then ran out the clock. It was a hard-played game that ended in a 14-10 Paladins victory, a game dominated by defense on both sides of the pitch.

He'd had to bow out of the post-match victory party to make this briefing on time, to the point where he was in his office rather than home, and what was more important, he used Aya's own policies against her to more or less kick the guards out and send them home. Since the Syndicate had been tossed out of the galaxy, Jason's restrictions had been lifted, at least after he twisted Aya's arm about it, so he came to the office by himself in his hovercar...and thus Aya had no idea exactly *how* he was attending this meeting.

He sat up in a storage unit that was holding his bionoid, one of the "coffin special" units, and couldn't help but look down at his green hands. This was his Benga bionoid, built to allow him to move unnoticed through Syndicate territory. Its official designation was Infiltrator Model MIMB-3.0A. It looked something like him, using his basic facial features which were then altered to fit within Benga norms. The biggest change was to the shape of his eyes and his cheekbones, as well as a slight squaring of his jaw to more closely match male Benga. Blond was a very rare hair color for a Benga, but since it was possible, he retained his natural hair color. Rook had given him the same color eyes as well, so in that respect, he did kind of look the same.

But the skin...that was definitely going to take some acclimation. He was going to be doing double-takes every time he glanced at his own hands for a while.

The outside looked different, but the inside was the same. The bionoid felt like any other bionoid, and he had more than enough experience in his macro bionoid unit that he climbed out of the storage unit on steady feet

and stood beside it without wobbling, used to the change in his center of gravity. The body felt just as light and strong as any other bionoid, and its onboard computer reported that it was fully operational and ready for service. The unit wasn't biogenic, it was moleculartronic—no way was he risking them getting their grubby hands on a biogenic crystal—but he was used to that as well. He wasn't merged to the bionoid so much as he was merged to the biogenic control unit in one of the deepest and undetectable secret complexes the Kimdori had constructed under the factory, which then communicated with the bionoid on a dedicated hyperthreaded gravband frequency that had more than enough range to allow him to wander just about anywhere in the star system. It was on a frequency block that Syndicate comm couldn't even detect, let alone access, so there was no risk that their sensors or comm techs would pick it up.

He'd risk biogenic units in the complex, since Kraal had everything under control, but not in a bionoid that would leave it.

The bionoid was designed to allow him to move around on E Chaio without detection, and it had been built with stealth in mind, which was a no-brainer given it was an infiltrator model. The unit's biorhythmics were layered over sensor dampening tech that made the bionoid appear as a living thing on most scanners, even appeared to be organic to an X-ray, and the unit's flesh was the most recent version of Rook's synthetic flesh experiments, the most lifelike version yet. The newest incarnation of the synthetic flesh had ducts under the dermal layer that circulated synthetic blood, which meant the unit would "bleed" if its synthetic flesh was cut, and that blood would scan as a biological substance. This one was filled with synthetic Benga blood, for obvious reasons. To scanners, it looked like a living thing. To the touch, it felt like a living thing. It even had breath that smelled organic, and like all current versions, it could eat and drink.

And like most bionoids, it was also armed. It had monomolecular blades and a Korgg tetryon wave weapon in each arm, and like Cori's bionoid, it had internal grav pods that would allow the bionoid to fly.

He ran his hand down his opposite forearm, feeling the "muscles" under the skin, warm skin with fine hair, then he reached into the storage unit and pulled out a set of very nondescript clothing that would make him appear to be just one of the millions of wage slaves on E Chaio, a regular joe working

a menial job and doing his best to make ends meet. His ID card told him that his new name was Jak Ba Ru Air, a clever play on the old “Jack Brewer” identity he’d once used for VulTech, a long, long time ago. That told him that Kraal had really done his homework if he knew that name. His corp was Tricor Industries, and he was listed as a custodian on his ID, which included his job title. He was a janitor that worked in a small office complex in Maju Raki, which was the “town” in which the factory was located. Tricor owned the factory too, as well as most of Maju Raki, both business and real estate. So, it wouldn’t look out of place at all for him to wander around the area.

He remembered the reports he read. In Benga society, this ID card was *everything*. It was his ID, it was his passport, it was his debit card...and it was a locator beacon that would allow cops to find him if they wanted. The report mentioned that they used to use sub-dermal chips for it, but the cost to replace them if they were damaged or update them if the person changed job titles made them go back to external cards.

Everything was about money with the Benga. Cheap, cheap, cheap, do whatever was cheapest, even if it wasn’t the best.

Benga commoners were fully aware that the cards could be used to track them, so quite a few of them circumvented that with card sleeves made of a commonly available material that blocked the comm signal the chip broadcasted, and only took them out if they needed to use them. The practice even had a name, it was called “sleeving your card.” But the amusing part was, they didn’t sleeve the chips really to hide from the cops, they did it to hide from the bombardment of ads while they were in public spaces, which read their cards—which included *everything*, even their shopping histories—and tried to target them with today’s great deals on whatever merchandise it was that they bought most often. That desire for a few minutes of peace and quiet on the tram would give him a perfectly legitimate excuse to sleeve his own card. It was technically illegal to sleeve a card—the corps have to have that revenue—but nobody really enforced the law. Most cops in Benga society didn’t work for the state, they worked for a corp, and they too were just wage slaves...who sleeved their cards themselves.

The door opened, and Kraal came in...which made Jason do a double-take. It was the same Kraal he knew and liked, but this Kraal stood eye to eye with his bionoid. He'd used his shapeshifting ability to increase his height. "Kraal," he said in surprise. "You're tall."

"We found it more convenient to just make ourselves the size of Benga and use their equipment," he replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Since so few non-Benga live on E Chaio, it's actually rather hard to find local equipment sized for anything but a Benga."

"That makes sense," he nodded in understanding, putting his ID card on the edge of his storage unit and pulling his shirt over his head, then putting on a pair of underwear best described as boxer briefs. "Who else is attending?"

"Maraa has a report on recent Consortium activities she will present at this briefing," he answered.

"Sounds good," he said, reaching for the workman's coveralls that Kraal had acquired for him, the uniform he would wear at his job. For a custodian, that jumpsuit-style gray garment with two orange horizontal stripes across the chest and the Tricor insignia both on the chest above the stripes and on the back of the garment was standard wardrobe. A man on his salary could afford little in the way of luxury, so it wasn't unusual for a janitor to wear his work coveralls more or less all the time. For a wage slave like Jason's Benga identity, clothes *were* a luxury. He put on his boots, which felt both a little stiff and a touch heavy, then he followed Kraal out of the storage room. They entered an underground complex filled with Kimdori, all Benga sized, sitting at consoles, scurrying back and forth, or poring over physical documents. This was part of Kraal's staff, analysts and field agents in from their missions to hand over their findings to said analysts or prepping for their next mission. They were deep under the glassworks factory, so deep that no sensor could penetrate, so deep that they were in the actual bedrock of the planet rather than the artificial surface, which was hundreds of shakra deep. The facility was completely separate from the factory above, even had its own power source and environmental systems, and it was very, very big. It needed to be, given Kraal was more or less the Gamekeeper for 85% of Andromeda. He had a staff of thousands of analysts and thousands more field agents, and this was the nerve center of the galaxy-spanning operation.

Kraal led him to a small briefing room, which held only a single small table. He sat at it, almost feeling like he was about to be interrogated, full holograms of Zaa, Jinaami, and Miaari appeared on either side of him, sitting on holographic chairs and aligned to look as if they were sitting at the table as well. Seconds later, the ghost-furred albino Kimdori Maraa stepped into the room and stood quietly by the door.

“Jinaami, it’s good to see you,” he said, looking past Miaari to her.

“You as well, friend Jason,” the honey-colored Kimdori smiled in return.

“You here to give or receive?”

“Receive. Denmother felt I needed to be aware of what goes on, given that Empress Dahnai has access to more information than the rest of the Confederation.”

“Sound thinking,” he agreed, nodding to Zaa.

“You look decidedly strange as a Benga, friend Jason,” Miaari mused.

“Yeah, it’s the eyes,” he nodded. “And the green skin’s a bit of a distraction. I find myself constantly resisting the urge to scream *Hulk smash*.”

That made Miaari burst out into uncharacteristic laughter, given where they were.

“If we are ready,” Kraal said, stepping up to the front of the room and facing them.

“We are, Handgroom,” Zaa said. “Relate what you have learned.”

“Yes, my Denmother,” he replied. “Firstly, the Board still has not decided on a response to the attack on Atrovet, the Dreamer’s former homeworld,” he said, an image of the moon appearing on a flat hologram behind him, projected onto the featureless wall. “But what they have agreed to do is mobilize the fleet. They have pulled assets from the press on the last of the Consortium territory and moved it to strategic locations through Andromeda. They know that the Oracles are the focus of the CCM’s movements, and the Oracles they have that are loyal are predicting more attacks, primarily on any system holding Dreamers. Other Oracles are

discounting those predictions, creating an unheard-of dilemma in their history, the fact that different Oracles are predicting different things. They haven't quite decided how to respond to that, but what all of them are responding to is the fact that anywhere they are holding the Dreamers is a primary target for CCM attack."

"So, the plans we're making to hit the planet where they took most of the Dreamers isn't going to be a surprise," he said grimly, to which Kraal nodded.

"The Syndicate is moving considerable assets within reach of the system as we speak, but not *in* the system, as they are aware of the interdictors and understand the threat they pose. The Oracles have predicted that the battle will end in victory if they put enough ships in front of us."

"That's a fairly narrow point of view," Jason noted, rubbing his chin and thinking about it. Kraal was polite enough to remain quiet to let him do so. He finally looked back up at the Handgroom. "What about if we *don't* fight? What do the Oracles predict about that?"

"They haven't thought to ask the Oracles that question, Jason, and you know how their power works for the ones they have. They respond only to questions directly posed, since in their dream state, they can't think abstractly in any way except for predictions based on what directly affects themselves. They are limited to only what they are asked, and the Syndicate is not asking them the right questions. That is on top of the fact that some of the Oracles must see their own freedom and are deliberately deceiving them, much as Aria did. That is why different Oracles are giving different responses to the questions posed to them. In a way, the Oracles are rebelling against them."

"A clandestine operation?" Miaari asked, looking over at him.

He nodded. "If we can't take the Dreamers by force, then we sneak them off the planet by stealth," he replied. "I'm sure we can get infiltrators down there with beacons. I've seen where they're keeping them, and the place is so big that the Syndicate would be hard pressed to keep an eye on all of them. I'm sure we can find a way to sneak them off the planet. It won't be fast given we'll only have three nexus bridges available, my two and your one, but we can get them off if we move carefully and keep the

system interdicted so they can't move them. The Syndicate won't kill them, they're far too valuable."

"I'm sure that if you give Kraal the intel you have, he can come up with a plan," Zaa declared.

"I'll have Cybi send it to you, Kraal."

"I already have that intel, your Grace. Cybi is supplying us with all intel gathered from KMS and CCM surveillance operations. You did order it."

"That's right, I did," he recalled. "So you've seen the layout of the base where they took most of the Dreamers."

"I have. And I agree, I think we can plan an operation to spirit them off the planet by using a nexus bridge, as long as we are careful and don't get greedy. A few at a time, slowly and steadily, laying down false trails that the vanished Dreamers have escaped into the planet's wilds. There is a significant wilderness area abutting the base, which would make such a misdirection feasible. And we must have multiple contingency plans in place for when the Syndicate uses the Oracles to uncover our scheme."

"That won't matter," Jason said. "It won't do them any good to ask the Oracles if they have no way to communicate with the forces on the planet, unless they have an Oracle there."

"Go after their quantum computers?" Miaari asked.

He nodded again. "The very first thing we do after interdicting the system. Jam it against their hyperspace pulse comm and then take out their QE computers. So, I need you to do me a favor, Kraal. Find out which ships are being sent there, which ones have QE computers, and where they are in the ships. We can either set up a few stellar collectors to target them and take them out or get an infiltrator in the system with a beacon to set things up, and I'll send in my special ops teams to take them out."

"We can get that information," Kraal assured him. "We could destroy the sister units here on E Chaio, but it would reveal to the Syndicate that we have an operation on their capitol planet."

"No, we don't want them knowing you're here quite yet," Jason said, to which Zaa nodded. "You can do far more damage while they think they're invincible."

“They are supremely overconfident, to the point where their internal security is almost criminally lax,” Kraal chuckled with a nod. “And if you don’t mind a suggestion, Jason, the stellar collectors will be the more viable option. For us to invade their ships and take out the QE devices from within would give them additional intel to use against us when we start the operations to recover the Oracles on board ships. The more we do it, the more practice they will get defending against it.”

He thought about that a second, then nodded. “I’ll have some collectors moved in. You find out which ships we target and we’ll take them out. We’ll just make sure the collector beam penetrates deeply enough to destroy the QE computer. If not, they’ll just salvage it and put it on another ship.”

“We will send that intel to Myri as soon as we have it,” he declared.

“Speaking about readiness, are they warning their fleets about our tactics now?”

“They are, that was the next thing I was going to address,” Kraal answered. “Most of Sha Ra’s data has been filtered down to the fleet over here, and they’re making the necessary changes. They’re converting Torsion cannons into ion cannons, pulling older weapons out of storage and installing them on ships, warning their fleet commanders against making fatal mistakes against CCM tactics, and are analyzing what little data they have on interdictors to find a way around them. The next time you meet them in battle, Jason, they will be more prepared. Sha Ra was a brilliant commander, and her observations and tactics were passed on to Syndicate HQ before you destroyed her QE computer.”

“That’s good to know,” he nodded. “I take it you’ve warned Lorna?”

“We’ll be sending her a report as soon as this briefing is over,” he answered, then a new hologram appeared, an image of a huge, cavernous chamber holding a roughly circular raised tier. It was the room where the Board met, he’d seen holos of it before. “The Board’s reaction to our invasion of Andromeda has been one of contention,” he said, glancing back at the hologram. “The warning that an invasion of the Milky Way will almost certainly end in failure has split the Board into two major factions. Those that are interested in a peaceful resolution with the Confederation, and those who would simply build a fleet so grand and overwhelming that

they would win that war. Needless to say, the cost of building such a force is one of the major sticking points in their negotiations,” he said dryly. “Those that oppose are more interested in the short-term bottom line, primarily those megacorps that have lost the most money between the Consortium operation and sending the invading fleet to the Milky Way, where those that are in favor see the wealth they could gain from taking Confederate technology and territory, almost exclusively over the Stargates and the nexus bridge. They see such devices as the means to conquer the entire supercluster, to bring them wealth and power beyond even their most avaricious dreams. They argue that the secrets of the Stargates alone makes acquiring it worth any cost, any expense. They see the loss of the invading fleet as only the first phase of a plan to conquer our galaxy by attrition,” he explained. “What you once called the worst-case scenario, your Grace. Them simply sending over wave after wave and wearing us down by sheer force of numbers and their nearly infinite resources.”

“Split evenly?” Jason asked.

“Mostly,” he replied. “There’s insufficient votes to authorize a full invasion of our galaxy, which takes a sixty percent majority vote. That’s ninety-two votes at the current time, and there are only eighty-four votes for war.”

“Eight votes. They could pull that off,” Jason said thoughtfully.

Kraal nodded. “Needless to say, Denmother has authorized us to try to sway that vote in our favor,” he said. “Using subterfuge and propaganda.”

“Good luck,” he said sincerely. “What’s the short-term reaction?”

“As of yet, they haven’t decided on a course of action,” he answered. “The taking of Atrovet shocked them, Jason, to a point where right now they are in what you would call denial. They simply cannot believe that we even got over here, let alone managed to capture one of their most critical systems. And in a way, it is our presence here that has split the Board concerning declaring war. The hawks correctly deduced that we somehow got a Stargate over here and used it to cross over into Andromeda, and our action had opened their eyes to just how powerful that technology really is. The only decisions they have made are to reinforce any system holding

Dreamers against Confederate attack. They know what we are after, and they move to protect the Dreamers they still have in their custody.”

“We can use that against them,” Jason chuckled darkly.

“Not as easily as you may think, Jason. They are aware of the interdictors, and are not going to fall into the trap that ensnared Sha Ra.”

Jason rapped his fingers on the table, deep in thought. “Then I think it’s time to start moving against the Board, Kraal,” he said. “Not *you*. Us. I need you to compile me a list of all material assets personally held by the members of the Board,” he said, looking at the Kimdori male. “Manors. Yachts. Vacation houses. Those kinds of things. I’ll gather up a squadron of my best frigates and have them go blow them up. I once warned Hrathin’s father that we wouldn’t bring the war to his people, we would bring the war to *him*, and I think we should adopt that tactic over here. If these Board members care about nothing but wealth and power, then let’s go after what they care about the most. Their wealth and power. If they see the ruin we can inflict on them *personally*, then perhaps they won’t be quite so eager to engage in war with us. That’s going to help us in the short term and the long term, by further stirring them up and paralyzing any kind of immediate response, and by scaring them into voting against this war resolution.”

Kraal gave him a long look, then a slow smile spread across his muzzled face. “That is both devious and dastardly, your Grace. That proves you are a cousin.”

“It has potential,” Zaa agreed. “But there exists the risk that we go too far and inflame them into declaring war out of spite. So we apply that leverage selectively. Show them what *can* happen should they move against us, that the war will not be fought in some distant star system, but on their own doorstep. Literally. Handgroom, assemble the list of assets as Jason has requested.”

“It will be done by the end of the day, my Denmother,” he nodded.

“I’ll pick one item on the list owned by each member of the Board and send a frigate out to destroy it, have them strike simultaneously so the Board members don’t get wind of what we’re doing until it’s already done,” Jason told them. “We can just barely fit a gunboat’s cased plasma torpedo in a frigate’s landing bay, so they can just push it out of the landing bay and

the torpedo will do the rest. I'm sure a cased plasma torpedo will have more than enough firepower to destroy whatever it hits, those things have nearly the same yield as a torpedo fired from a launcher. Hell, I'll have to have them bring the yield down so the torpedo doesn't wipe out half a city, if they're striking a target in a populated area. Then, when we open negotiations with them, I make it clear to them that I have that list, and I'll go right down it if they declare war, that I'll go after them and their wealth *personally*. I've found that most people who love to start wars really, really don't like it when they have to fight them themselves."

"I will have that list to you as soon as it is compiled, cousin," Kraal said with a wicked smile.

Kraal went over a few minor points, mainly touching on past subjects, then he yielded the floor to Maraa. The albino Kimdori gave them a detailed briefing about the movements of the Consortium fleet, both military and civilian as they gathered up ships for their exodus, then focused on the front between what little territory they had left and Syndicate territory. "The reduction of Syndicate assets along the front will be noticed," she predicted, pointing to a series of star systems. "It will allow them to fortify their positions and buy them more time to assemble their evacuation fleet. This is their dedicated course of action, for they now believe that the Syndicate is intentionally stalling the peace negotiations to give them time to get into position to make a final push to completely conquer the Consortium. What is important to note, your Grace, is that the Consortium knows we are here," she said. "Intel has reached them that the CCM has crossed over into this galaxy and has attacked Syndicate territory. They are seeking to gain communications with us, most likely to discuss a possible alliance against a common foe."

"No way is that going to happen, not after what they did," Jason growled. "They have several billion black marks against them, particularly with the Alliance, Urumi, and Skaa. And those three can exert enough pressure to scuttle any council vote to ally with them. Much as Dahnai may hate it, Assaba has a powerful voice in council."

"Have you made a decision about the offer you discussed tendering to them, your Grace?"

“Yeah, but this isn’t the time to broach it with them,” he replied. “Especially since I don’t want the Syndicate to see us putting up a Stargate, they’d go right after it. We have to wait until they launch their fleet and bring it out of hyperspace out in flat space, far enough away from Andromeda that the Syndicate can’t get a fleet there in time to try to capture the gate. Besides, unless the Kimdori scouts found something, we haven’t found a place to send them yet.”

“We haven’t either,” Zaa added. “No Kimdori scout has yet to make it out of the supercluster, and you did make it clear that they would be sent outside of the supercluster.”

He nodded. “So far away that it would take them several thousand years to get back,” he affirmed. “And I thought they’d have made it out of the supercluster by now.”

“The furthest Kimdori scout is nine days from reaching Melakaan A, the closest galactic formation in the Ajouris Supercluster, the closest of the three superclusters bordering our own. It is a the closer of a pair of disc galaxies, each about one fifth the size of the Milky Way.”

“You’re way ahead of us, the *Lexington* is going to launch for Ajouris Major next takir,” he noted. “It’s carrying enough hyperspace probes to cover half the galaxy on top of enough equipment to establish a permanent outpost in a favorable location. I had them refit the ship so it’s bionoid only. The bionoids will get the ship out there and build an outpost, then our plan is to use a nexus bridge to get people out there to do the local exploration. That way my people aren’t stuck on a ship for two months”

“Going straight to the hub galaxy?”

“We figured we could establish a main base there and spread out in a radial pattern to explore the supercluster,” he answered. “Which should only take about thirty years,” he added dryly.

“Not a bad plan,” Zaa nodded.

Maraa went over a few final points, but not really revealing much in the way of major new information, and the briefing ended. With that, Jason went up to the factory and exited through a service entrance, walked down a deserted alley, and then merged in with the foot traffic and just became another face in the crowd. Armed with a detailed map of the city and a

schedule for the transports that would take him anywhere on E Chaio he wanted to go.

This was something he needed to do. This was something he needed to see. He wanted to walk among the lay citizens of the Syndicate, the common man and woman, he wanted to see what their world was like so he could better understand them. True, they had nothing to do with the running of their government, they were all literal slaves to the megacorps that owned them, but nevertheless they formed the backbone of the way the government worked, and he wanted to see those insignificant cogs within the vast machine...to remind him that war had a cost on both sides.

He remembered how he had started to feel less and less for the *other* numbers on those war reports. Every number was a *life*, and there were numbers, there were lives, on both sides. He couldn't lose sight of that, he couldn't become like many others in the Confederation who didn't see the suffering they inflicted on their enemies as anything but good, often not understanding that the ones they caused to suffer the most often had nothing to do with that was going on in the first place. He had to do this because they weren't playing only defense now. They were in Andromeda, they were in the Syndicate's territory, and that meant that the attacks they initiated had the real potential to cause harm far beyond just the soldiers that opposed them. His plans to interdict key Syndicate systems would put hardship on the civilians on those planets, and he needed to remind himself that the suffering of an enemy was still suffering, and that he would be the cause of it.

Sitting on a subway tram racing through a tunnel at high speed, riding towards the Syndicate's capitol so he could look at their capitol with his own (sort of) eyes, he watched the other passengers, and saw what the Syndicate was for those who were a part of it. What he saw, what he realized, was that these were broken people. They had no hope. They had no dreams. They had no joy. They were crushed by the system that made them little more than a number, to the point where the only thing that mattered to them was money. The only happiness they could achieve for themselves was represented by money, by buying a better life. The greed of the Benga was represented in its lowest social classes by the feeble hope that money could make their lot better, as they sought the only happiness

they could find in the material things that comforted them through their sorrow.

They didn't even seem to have love. He watched what he thought were Benga couples, and even those he could identify as pairs, maybe married maybe not, he wasn't too sure about Benga social customs, there seemed to be little or no interaction. Perhaps, he pondered as he watched an older couple, both wearing uniforms that marked them as kitchen workers, Benga customs frowned on public displays of affection...but there seemed to be more to it than that. The way they looked at each other, it was like...like it was a *business arrangement*.

After arriving in the capitol and disembarking, walking along the streets of what was the grandest of all Benga cities with its over the top, gaudy grandeur and flamboyant displays of wealth that silently taunted those that didn't have anything, he saw that his initial impression was correct. These people had no love for each other, and thus no love for any other, just as the *shaman* had once told him. He could see it in the way they acted, the way they interacted in public social situations. People didn't hold doors open for each other. People treated everyone else like an obstacle, a potential rival, and he saw several shouting matches and even one fistfight over silly things like who would take a seat. Mothers kept their children very close to them as they walked the streets, and he saw an uncharacteristic lack of anything resembling how Faey children acted in them. The kids were all dead quiet and nearly clung to their mothers—not fathers, only mothers—as if they were terrified of what might happen if they were separated.

These people...they *hated* each other. This wasn't a society, it was a collection of individuals each desperately afraid for themselves thrown into a cage with each other.

They had no love. They had no kindness. They had no empathy. They had nothing...nothing but fear and the twisted belief that the only thing that could make their lives better was the money that could buy them material things, wealth, and power. They believed that those things were the only salve that would bind the wounds that reached all the way down to their souls.

It was...it was *sad*. It was a tragedy. It was almost heartbreaking. He sat on a low wall outside one of the major megacorp HQs as the common

Benga filed back and forth in front of him—the executives wouldn't be caught dead down so close to the ground—and nearly felt like crying at seeing the stark, terrible truth of the Benga and the Syndicate with his own eyes. It both filled him with a seething anger at those that ran this society and concern for those whose lives he was about to make even worse than they already were. It was nearly an entire galaxy without hope, without happiness, without love...and he knew then, felt it in his heart, that they had to stand against it.

They couldn't allow this darkness out of Andromeda. This was a disease on the universe itself, a disease far too advanced to cure, and it had to be contained in the tumor that couldn't be removed. It had to be isolated to protect the rest of the cosmos from its dark, evil taint.

It was right there in their complex language, where so many words had so many meanings that the same sentence could have twenty different meanings...but in all those vast definitions, there was no word that truly described *love*. And the closest word to *kind* actually meant *without malice*.

These were truly *the Loveless Ones*. There could not be a more fitting name than the one the *shaman* had given them.

He became dimly aware of two Benga men in uniforms standing in front of him, nearly over him. "You are trespassing, citizen," one of them said harshly. "That's a thousand *tek* fine."

Of course. The wall. He was sitting on the wall, and nobody else was, they wouldn't get within five shakra of it. He stood up slowly, having to resist the nearly overpowering urge to extend his monomolecular blades and skewer these two corp-cops. But, his sense of moral outrage wasn't going to allow him to just meekly submit to their demands, which would be to pay the fine on the spot or face arrest, which was the one thing that just about any common Benga desperately avoided at any cost. Arrest led to jail sentences, which was basically just selling them into *official* slavery. A ten day jail term could turn into a lifetime of hard labor in the most horrid conditions imaginable for no pay due to the way the Syndicate "justice" system worked, where infractions were invented to tack on more and more sentence time, and the only way out of it was to buy your way out. And the Syndicate being what they were, these two corp cops wouldn't just let him

off with a warning. Collecting as many fines as possible was the most important part of their jobs.

“You will turn around and walk away,” Jason told them in a cold, dead voice.

Both of them laughed scornfully. “Are you threatening an officer? What’s the fine for that, Vod? Ten thousand *tek*?” the taller one asked the shorter one.

He was about to do something that would get him in a whole lot of trouble, but he got control of himself. Rook would *murder* him if he had to self-destruct the bionoid just because Jason was feeling pecky, not after all the work he put into designing and building it. And besides, even an 11,000 *tek* fine was a drop in the bucket of what he had available if necessary. This was not the time for moral crusades. This was not the time to let his emotions get the best of him. No matter how much right he had to be angry, disgusted, he couldn’t blow the bionoid’s cover, it would threaten Kraal’s operation if the Board found out a Confederation bionoid was on *E Chaio*... and Kraal had shown him a tremendous amount of trust to let him go out by himself, because of that very possibility. He gave a slow blink, then passed a hand over his face. “I apologize for my rudeness. I’ve just had some very surprising news. But that was no excuse, either to take it out on you or break the law,” he said with what he felt was suitable contrition. But he also knew that the Benga before him would show him no consideration for that. They had no empathy. They simply *did not care* about his personal problems. If he was laying on the sidewalk bleeding, they would fine him for trespassing, vagrancy, and vandalism of corporate property as his blood stained the sidewalk.

They were an entire race of sociopaths, institutionally conditioned sociopaths.

He took out his ID card—making sure to pull it out of its sleeve while still in its pocket so they couldn’t fine him for a sleeved card—and surrendered it to the officer. He gave a nasty smile as he slotted it in his card reader, which would allow him to collect the fine. “So, a thousand for trespass, ten thousand for threatening an officer, and let’s say five thousand just because you’re an ass,” he said with a vicious smirk. The device beeped, and he looked almost disappointed as he literally flung the card

back at Jason, as if expecting him to not have the balance to pay the fine. Both the Benga gave a bit of start, though, when Jason snapped a hand up and caught the card quite easily, then slid it back into his pocket in a smooth motion, as if it were the easiest thing in the world.

“Surprised I could pay the fine, officer? I wasn’t always a janitor,” Jason said in a low, steady voice as he turned his back to them, then started walking away. “And if you’re not careful, you may end up pushing a broom too.”

He’d meant to go see the exceptionally ostentatious building that was the Board HQ, but he didn’t need to see it. Not now. He already knew what kind of soulless leeches he was dealing with here, by the “perfect” society that those men and those who came before them had built over the last few thousand years. A society without kindness or compassion, a society ruled by greed and fear, a society where more people than Jason could count were the slaves of 153 demons, Faey *gara uka*, Makati *maijar*, Grimja *kinkou*, Kirri *rorraikka*. They were the ultimate embodiments of evil, black holes that sought to suck all happiness and joy out of the universe to fill the voids within them, much as they had destroyed everything that was good in their own people, and countless races and species across Andromeda.

Back home, he almost felt the *jaingi* burning on his shoulders and back as his bionoid headed for the subway station. He had met the enemy and seen the truth of them, and it had steeled his resolve, even as it reminded him not to *become* the enemy in his quest to prevent their darkness from spreading out of Andromeda. That was the dark path the Consortium had followed, and it had tainted them with the same evil that they had once opposed. Even if the executives in the megacorps and many in the military were beyond redemption, those that sought to maintain the current order because it benefited them personally, that was no reason to spread misery on the nameless masses that made up the Syndicate’s civilians and working class. Even if they had never known love, that was no reason to stack hate upon them. After all, they were slaves to a vast machine that did not in any way care about them.

Maybe...maybe there was hope for *them*. Maybe with just a little kindness, they could change. Maybe...all they needed was a little *faith*.

Blinking his eyes, Jason Karinne sat up from the reclining seat in the merge pod and pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers. Merging to a moleculartronic bionoid that long in another galaxy had very nearly given him a headache. He also almost dislodged Chichi from his lap when he sat up. The tabi was reared up on her back legs, her front legs on his chest, and there was a look of true concern on her little feline face and in her lavender eyes.

Of course, she was empathic. She could sense the emotions he had experienced walking the streets of E Chaio, and she had come into the room off his office to try to comfort him. He put a hand on her back and smiled down at her. "I'm fine, Chichi. And thank you," he said softly, stroking her nearly sinfully soft black fur. He leaned his head down, and she gave him a fond lick on the tip of his nose, then pressed her forehead against his in an act of compassion and affection. And that did make him feel better. Much, much better.

He got out of the merge pod and walked into the main office, which was empty thanks to the fact that Aya had lifted the wartime restrictions, which meant he was allowed to come to work by himself again and drive his own hovercar. But despite that, Dera and Shen were out in the outer office, as Aya flexed her muscles and proved to Jason that not even when she let him roam free was he ever off her leash. He carried the tabi over to his desk and sat down, settling her on his lap, then he had Chirk get him in touch with Myri rather than him just walking down there. Her face appeared on a flat hologram hanging in midair on the other side of his desk. "Did the Kimdori talk to you?" he asked.

"Yeah, we've given over on the planning," she answered. "No way are we going in if they're expecting us like that. Miaari's aide said that the Kimdori are working up a plan to get the Dreamers off the planet using a nexus bridge."

He nodded. "But what's more, hon, is that we won't catch the Syndicate with their pants down again. Kraal told me that they're refitting their ships, converting or getting rid of their Torsion weapons, and their fleet commanders will have Sha Ra's intel about us."

"Miaari told us," she nodded. "Lorna said she's ready for them to change tactics, and we'll have some new surprises under our robes the next

time we lock horns with them. It just won't be at V3ÄE-31, or at least not immediately. Lorna's still going to design a battle plan to take the system by force in case the Kimdori plan fails or gets exposed, one that takes into account the fact that they know we're coming and they'll be ready for us. It just won't be easy."

He nodded.

"She still wants you to deploy some stellar collectors there, so they're in place and ready in case they're needed."

"Not a problem. You can do that."

"I already did. I deployed eighty collectors to the system, and they're already in position fifteen light seconds from the planet and in CMS mode."

"Then why did you ask me about it?" he challenged.

"So you feel like you have a say in things," she winked.

"Bitch. Did Miaari pass on my order about the frigates?"

"Yeah, we're loading gunboat plasma torpedoes onto a squadron of them," she replied. "They can fit two into the landing bay, one in each zip ship bay. An engineer threw together a fairly simple launcher system that works fairly well, basically he just jerry-rigged a torpedo hoversled to go much faster than they're usually designed to go. That'll give them enough velocity to clear the landing bay before their engines engage. The frigate can launch them while cloaked, they just have to open their landing bay doors. They should be ready by the time we have targets and you give the order."

"I didn't consider that. That might be useful," he said absently. "A weapon they can use while cloaked."

"There's nowhere to put one in a frigate, unless we take out the landing bay."

"We don't need to. I'm sure we can just make a few minor tweaks to the landing bay so it can carry two torpedoes instead of two zip ships. You know, add things like anchor locks for the torpedoes so they're secure and whatnot. I don't think doing things like that would take up any additional

space under the deck or eat into the landing bay's volume to the point where it can't carry zip ships."

She was quiet a long moment. "I'm not sure. Maybe. If so, yeah, I see your point."

"Eh, have Naval Engineering look into it."

"Sure thing. Anyway, I picked veteran captains, a mission like this will require them to sneak in under CMS and all but get under the Syndicate's noses, then the ship has to get out in one piece. That means we send captains with experience in stealth operations. Lorna did want me to ask you something, in case I saw you before she did."

"What?"

"She wants to know how many interdictors you can get set up. We have to start locking down their fleets and disrupting their trade routes. She has a list of systems she wants us to interdict, as soon as possible."

"We'll have to coordinate that with the Kimdori, we'll need their SCM screens to conceal the interdiction effect while it builds up," he mused, mainly to himself. "That was one of the subjects I discussed with Kraal during the meeting. The Kimdori have their own list of systems to interdict based on the intel he's gathered, so we need to get both lists and look them over, combine them into one. Tell Lorna to send her list to Miaari and she'll have her analysts combine the lists, putting priority on systems that appear on both lists, and get back to her."

"Sure thing," she nodded. "Putting Tim to work, eh?"

"He needs it, he's getting lazy," he snorted, which made her chuckle. "That's about it, hon. I think I'm going to go home. That meeting took a lot more out of me than I expected," he said wearily. "Right now, I need a long, hot bath and a good nap."

"Alright. I'll be home in a while myself."

"Lorna still here?"

"No, she delinked. That was a bionoid, Jayce," she told him.

"She has a bionoid here now?"

“Yeah, we just keep it locked down when she’s not using it, so she can’t sneak into it and look around when we’re not here.”

“Huh. I didn’t even notice,” he said.

“You were in a bionoid too, you couldn’t use talent or sense the biogenic unit in it. And they’re *designed* to be indistinguishable from the real thing, if you recall,” she winked.

“Well, it fooled the hell out of me,” he admitted. “I think I may talk to Rook about taking that bionoid recognition program he designed for Aya and putting it in my bionoids, so I know if I’m dealing with another bionoid.”

“Go home,” she ordered.

“Yes ma’am,” he replied. “See you tomorrow.”

He petted Chichi for a few minutes, organizing his thoughts before he left for the day, and lingering a little just so he could pay the tabi some attention. Sometimes he really did want to take her home with him, but he wasn’t allowed....and thankfully, Chichi didn’t seem to mind. She had lots of people here in the complex that paid her lots of attention at all times of the day and night, so she wasn’t lonely.

Amber was Rann’s, at least as much as a vulpar was owned by a person. Twilight was *Amber’s* pet. Chichi was the closest thing to his own personal pet that he had, and he wasn’t even allowed to take her home with him. What a world. He turned his chair to look out the window behind him, looking out past Cybi’s facility across the grassy campus and the *oye* tree growing in front of it—which more or less dominated the entire White House complex now, given its canopy was now well over the tallest of the six buildings on the grounds—and down the hill to Karsa, his home city. His home. “I don’t think I’m going to sleep very well tonight, Chichi,” he told her soberly, running his fingers over her ebon fur. “What I saw today... I’m glad you weren’t there. I think you’d die of a seizure if you ever went to E Chaio. The Benga...I’m not sure if I want to try to hug them or lock them in a prison and never let them out. They’ve never known a single kindness in their entire lives, and that makes me feel so sorry for them. But they’re all sociopaths, monsters, and I wouldn’t turn my back on any of them, not even a child. There is no kindness in them, no love. I hate what

they are, but I pity them for how they got that way. I'm getting confused just thinking about it."

She gave a little chirping *mrrow* and put her paw on his hand, patting it. He just had to chuckle. "I know. But there's one thing for certain, little girl. We can't ever let them out of their cage," he said with powerful gravity in his voice. "That kind of darkness, we can't let it out to infect the rest of the universe. We have to keep them inside their own territory, no matter what, and make sure that they can't infect us with their evil when we do interact with them, the way they did the Consortium. The Consortium became as bad as the Benga to fight against them, and in a way, they lost that war the moment they made that decision. When you make yourself like your enemy to fight them, you *become* your enemy. The Consortium is a very important lesson to the rest of us to be very careful in how we deal with the Benga, else we might become them ourselves." He picked up the tabi and held her in the crook of his arm. "I really do need to go home, girl. Do you mind?"

She gave a little meow.

"Alright, ten more minutes," he chuckled, scratching her behind the ear. She closed her eyes and leaned against his fingers and started to purr in contentment.

Chapter 8

Daira, 24 Miraa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Tuesday, 25 February 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Daira, 24 Miraa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Karsa Sports Complex, Karsa, Karis

The Paladins were going to play for the Empress' Crown.

The entire stadium was literally shaking from the roar of the crowd and the stomping of feet and tails on the decks, causing a tremble to roll through his feet as Jason stood with his kids in the stands, cheering right along with the rest of the planet. The entire house was watching this match, and the girls had not let them down. It had been a thriller of a finish, with the Paladins holding off the Kaidora Executioners 17-16. The entire fourth division was a back and forth as the two teams were never further apart than a single point, with the Paladins leading, then the Executioners, and back and forth in an epic, instant classic kind of struggle all the way to the final gun. The last two minutes were pure drama as the Paladins first tied it up, then their incredible defense held when the chips were on the table and it mattered the most, giving the Paladins the ball back on a blocked shot and a fast break set piece put them ahead, then the defense just turned into a complete stone wall, holding the Executioners off for the last 92 seconds of absolute nail-biting suspense. They blocked five shots in those 92 seconds, either by player or by the robo-blocker, as the Executioners went into a complete frenzy to try to tie the game before the final gun sounded. But that defense, that magnificent defense that Jyslin and Frinia had spent three years carefully building, had held. They denied the Executioners and won the match, and that was why the offense and midfielders were carrying the four defenders on their shoulders as they did their traditional lap around the

pitch after the victory. There was no doubt, batchi fans would be talking about this match for *years*.

It was complete insanity inside the stadium, and probably all across the holdings of the House of Karinne as well. The holo-tron was showing fans going nuts at viewing parties on other planets, including a KMS viewing party in the main port landing bay of the KMS *Tianne*, which was currently in orbit around Atrovet, serving as defensive picket as the Dreamers were evacuated from the moon. And right in the middle of the screaming KMS servicewomen was Admiral Palla Karinne, her pink hair and Jeraman dark blue skin undeniable.

“Ladies and Lads, Your *KARIS PALADINS!*” the PA announcer screamed excitedly over the stadium PA system as the team finished the lap and saluted the house flag, and that caused the roar in the stadium to reach nearly deafening levels. The team’s fight song started to play, and the crowd broke their screaming to pick up the song, the loudest it had ever been. And Jason bet they could hear it all the way out at Crystal Beach.

After the fight song was sung, the celebration continued...but not for Jason and the kids. Aya felt it was getting a bit too rowdy out on the stands, so she hustled them back up to the VIP box, where quite a few family and friends were watching the match. Dahnai and her family wasn’t, however, they were back on Draconis for the Immortals-Tigers match that would begin in about two hours. Yila was also there, and no doubt that right at that moment, the bet was running through her mind. If the Tigers lost that match, it was going to cost her *hundreds of millions* of credits.

Jason kissed and hugged his way through the strip girls, Rook, the CBIMs and CBMOMs, and several Generations and other people close to the family, like Mikano, several of the original members of 3D, his cabinet, and much to his annoyance, Shey, who had won a raffle to attend the match in the VIP box Navii had a ticket and didn’t feel up to attending in person, so she offered her ticket for a charity raffle for HQ, and being the insufferably lucky little bitch she was, Shey won it.

They settled down a bit later for the presentation of the Golden Wreaths, which were awarded to teams that won their playoff bracket and would play for the crown...kind of like a conference championship trophy. And as team owner, Jyslin joined the team down on the pitch, on the stand erected for the

ceremony, where she would get her own wreath. They were quite pretty, made out of hardened gold and sculpted to resemble *mati* vines with *mey* flowers woven into them, a symbolic representation of Trelle's garland. He went down to the pitch for the ceremony with Rann, Shya, and Aria, but they were off to the side, right in front of the stand with the other VIPs, reserved for elite VIPs invited by the club and family members of the players and coaches, so they could be *right there* for the presentation. Jason wouldn't be getting his own wreath. The team belonged to *Jyslin*, not to him. He had nothing to do with it, so it would be disingenuous of him to be on the stand and act like he did. That was her glory, not his, and he would not steal it from her.

Jyslin was interviewed on the stage by IBN after the wreath presentation, the Imperial Batchi Network, and it was all Jyslin. Filled with excitement and a bit of smugness, she heaped praise on the team, thanked the loyal Paladins fans throughout the House and Imperium, and promised one hell of a match when they played for the crown next Daira.

And after the presentation, Jyslin and the team adhered to long-standing IBL tradition. They spent a little time with their families, in front of the cameras, then they marched right out of the stadium still wearing their playing uniforms and boarded a transport for the practice facility, to start preparing for the championship match. It was ceremonial, to be sure, but it was a tradition. They'd shower and change at the practice facility, go home and enjoy the rest of the day—most of them would watch the second match to see who they'd be playing—and be back tomorrow morning to start preparing for the championship match.

That was half of the reason why the stadium wasn't emptying out. This was a special double header, and the second match of the day, the Immortals hosting the Tigers, would be holocasted onto the home pitch. Instead of going home to watch the match, the fans would have the option to watch it on the pitch, almost as if they were attending the match in Dracora. Granted, people would be too busy partying over the Paladins win to pay much attention to the other match, but they'd be buying concessions and souvenirs while here, and that was profit for the team.

For Jason and some members of his family, it meant a change of venue. As a member of the Imperial Family by virtue of both Shya's marriage to

Rann and Jason being Dahnai's *amu dozei*, they had invitations to attend the match in person with Dahnai in the Imperial Skybox in the Dracora Coliseum. But it wouldn't be just him. Dahnai had invited *all* of the older strip kids to the match, so the guards, Jason, and Seido would be herding ten excited kids along with them. His five kids and Danelle were invited, who was as good as his daughter and thus got to go. Outside of his family, Latoiya, Yuri, and Sami were also going, they were old enough to go and loved batchi. Mike Junior was old enough, but he didn't like batchi, so he wasn't going. Dahnai had also invited Tim and Symone, and they decided to go. Krirara, Kreel, and Enva would be riding with him, since they were at the Paladins match and got invites to the Immortals match as well. They'd be joining quite a few members of the council on Draconis for the match.

For that matter, several leaders attended the Paladins match using their bionoids, given how many hoops they had to jump through to visit Karis in person. It was easier for them both from a paperwork perspective and also a convenience perspective just to use their Hall of Peace bionoids. That just took a brief talk with Yeri to arrange.

The holocasting of playoff matches in other stadium pitches wasn't just restricted to Karis. Holocasting was a *big deal* for the team owners now as it had significantly increased their revenues, so all teams holocasted their away games on the home pitch, and quite a few had holocasted playoff games onto their home pitches to capitalize on those that preferred to watch matches in the stadium, to feel like they were there. Team owners were holocasting playoff matches by special arrangement and were giving a portion of their gate to the two playoff teams. But the teams were still earning a profit on it, so they were happy to do it.

Myleena earned a 0.25% piece of *every* holocasted game's profit, as the owner of the patent for the holocasting system. That didn't sound like much, until one realized that a team could earn a six figure profit on a holocasted match, giving her a solid C5,000 or so royalty for a match, and there were 32 matches every Daira that was earning her that royalty. So, every Daira during batchi season, Myleena was pulling down around C160,000, and that went up to around C280,000 during the playoffs, since every team was holocasting every match not their own home match. Over the entire season, Myleena earned about C1,500,000. And that was *just IBL batchi*. Other batchi leagues and other sports were using holocasting, from

interstellar leagues all the way down to planetary minor leagues. Myleena earned about C65,000 a year from the NFL on Terra, C240,000 a year from major league baseball, and C110,000 a year from English Premier League soccer, for example. She was earning royalties from *thousands* of stadiums all over the Confederation, in sports from batchi to *shiziki*. Jason figured that every year, she raked in a good C70,000,000 on royalties from holocasting alone.

And that was guaranteed income even beyond her own life span, since the holders of patents still in active use were considered intellectual property that could be inherited by the holder's children. So, Danelle and Siyara would be earning that royalty after Myleena passed on, and her descendants would continue to earn that royalty in perpetuity.

That was why Jason's patents were absorbed by the Imperium when they thought he was killed in the Orala Explosion, since he had no family to which they could be passed.

That woman was so insanely rich now that even Yila was getting jealous of her.

So, Jason, Tim, Symone, Seido, a herd of excited kids, and three galactic rulers were hustled through the stadium and to a waiting dropship, and they started for the KMS *Kinai*, which would be carrying them to Draconis. They didn't have to wear armor, since they'd be in secured areas controlled by the Imperial Guard, which Tim was exploiting for everything it was worth by dressing more like a Faey man than a Terran. He was wearing one of those open-torso thigh length robes favored by men, like a long-tailed overshirt, the robe a gift from Kellin to Tim last New Year's Day. Tim was *only* wearing the robe, which fell almost perfectly across his hips and thighs to showcase his penis and muscled stomach. Symone was the reason for that, she loved it when Tim dressed—or undressed—in ways that showed off his dick, which was by far her favorite part of his body. Symone was similarly scandalously clad, wearing what could best be described as black synth-leather riding chaps with nothing underneath, so her legs were covered but her crotch and her ass were not. And on top, she was wearing a skin-hugging shirt that had a sloping neckline that ran over the left shoulder and down to the right side of her waist, leaving her right shoulder and breast bare, and had a long left sleeve that went down to the

wrist but no right sleeve. It was an ancient style of shirt that went all the way back to the Faey's Iron Age. Faey archers would wear a shirt like that, binding and flattening down the left breast so it didn't get in the way of using a bow and leaving the right breast exposed, and the left sleeve protected the forearm from the bowstring and left the right arm unclad so nothing interfered with their draw arm.

That said a lot about Faey and their adherence to tradition, for a style of shirt to still be worn after nearly 7,000 years.

They boarded the *Kinai* and were greeted by Haema, Jann, and Cori's hologram. Haema ogled Tim a bit—she thought he was incredibly handsome—before escorting them down the companionway to the VIP travel lounge, a stateroom for Galactic rulers to enjoy being ferried about on the ship. As such it was luxuriously appointed and was large enough to accommodate a ruler and his retinue, which may number dozens of people. So it was more than large enough for the group. The kids and Symone ran to the window and looked out as Enva and Krirara seated themselves on one of the couches, while Jann and Tim scurried off to a corner to talk. They were close friends, and Jann was part of Tim's posse, much like Mikano was one of Jyslin's friends that often went out with her on her girl-only excursions. Tim was more of a bad influence on Jann than anything else, since he constantly got Jann into trouble with his wife, who was a Terran telepath and had very Terran sensibilities when it came to her husband cheating on her. Jason and Kreel sat across from the ladies as Seido packed away the travel bag for gate passage, and the ship started to move, turning to make for the Stargate to Draconis.

"All this running around is going to tire me out," Kreel complained lightly as he leaned back on the couch and threw his arms over the back as he put his feet up on the coffee table. He was wearing a traditional Grimja tunic, but was also wearing his favorite Bermuda shorts, leaving his furry legs bare from the knee down. The two garments didn't go very well together, though, so he looked a bit silly.

I'm sure you'll live, Kreel, Jason chided as he sat down beside him, then accepted a cup of coffee from Seido with a smile of thanks.

I've never been to the Dracora stadium before, Krirara mused.

“It’s the largest stadium in the IBL, seats like two hundred thousand,” Jason told her. “The Imperial Skybox is just as luxurious as the palace, so expect a lot of gaudy crap and like a hundred servants. The damn thing takes up almost the entire south side of the stadium’s skybox level. It’s the size of a mansion. It even has a *bedroom* in it. Seriously, why on Terra would a skybox need a bedroom?”

“Well, it is Faey,” Enva chuckled with a sly look on her face. *It’s certainly not for sleeping*, she added with a naughty tilt to her thought as she took a sip of coffee. Enva had grown quite fond of Terran coffee.

“Amen,” Jason agreed.

“Watch it, Enva, your people don’t exactly have a conservative reputation,” Kreel teased with a grin.

“We do what we want where we want, but at least we’re not rampant sluts,” she replied, which made all three of them burst into laughter.

While the others chatted, Jason caught up a bit on the status reports, splitting his attention so he didn’t look like he was ignoring them. The Syndicate knew they were in a major war now, because 570 of their most important systems were under interdiction. That was every single interdictor they had to spare, including using one of the tacklers as an interdictor until a unit could come off the assembly line. They hadn’t interdicted E Chaio, they didn’t want to jeopardize Kraal’s operation, but every satellite HQ planet for a Syndicate megacorp was interdicted, the most important major industrial, military, or commercial systems were interdicted, and their major trade route hubs had also been interdicted. That was absolutely strangling their inter-corp trade, and as such it was costing them a *fuckton* of money. The system holding the evacuated Dreamers was one of the interdicted systems, which was just one of 89 military outposts that had been interdicted. It didn’t look out of place for them to interdict that system due to the major shipyard operation they had there, and the fact that they had interdicted other shipyards further concealed the true reason they’d interdicted it.

From Kraal’s reports, the Board was almost in a spittle-flecked rage over the interdiction strategy, because they were losing money. They were losing a *lot* of money and had ground trade nearly to a halt within Syndicate

territory. It exposed their greatest weakness, since their civilian system to system tachyon comm was insufficient when it came to reorganizing trade routes to go around interdicted systems, making shipments either massively late or undeliverable, and that meant that the cargo those ships were supposed to pick up were stuck in warehouses, which was taking up space from cargo meant to replace those shipments once it was moved out. On the other side of it, ships unable to access their usual routes and hubs had no idea where their managers wanted them to go, since they couldn't communicate quickly or efficiently using tachyon comm (hyperspace pulse comm was reserved for military and government use only), and the sheer number of messages being sent over that system was overloading it. A message put in the queue for transmission right now had to wait nearly nine days to be sent, so many cargo ships were just sitting waiting for either messages to reach them or messengers sent from HQ to arrive to give them further orders. And if the ship wasn't in the system where the message was sent, it would not receive it.

They'd set up the interdiction 11 days ago, and it had only taken about five for the entire Syndicate's merchant marine system to grind to a screeching halt...and all over interdicting only 217 key trade route hub systems. They relied on the trade routes being so established that they didn't need extensive communication between ships and ports to route traffic, and now that the routes were closed and their civilian system to system tachyon comm was overloaded with messages, it was causing a gigantic snarl in their entire logistics operation. The Syndicate's refusal to upgrade their tech and their systems to save money was now a giant bear trap biting them in the ass, just as Jason had planned.

As far as the Dreamer operation over at V3ÄE-31 went, Kraal was already on the job. A pack of Kimdori infiltrators had reached the planet, named Goludet, set up their operation, and had already rescued 87 Dreamers after just 12 days. They couldn't rescue all of them at once, but Kraal had a very good plan in place to rescue a small number at a time and misdirect the Syndicate into thinking they'd escaped from the internment camp and had fled into a nearby forest. That trick wasn't going to work forever, which was why he had other plans ready to go when needed. And when the number of remaining Dreamers reached a critical point, they *would* rescue all of them at once, when they could do it safely.

The last little order of business on the Syndicate list was Jason's very personal and very dirty answer to the Board's members. Kraal had located the "crown jewel" holding of each of them that wasn't located on E Chaio, their favorite manor, or estate, or building, or whatever, and Jason had ordered Myri, Juma, and Navii to prepare an operation to destroy them in a simultaneous attack. That plan was now ready, and the frigates that would do the job were sitting in orbit around Prakka 21-E and were just waiting for the go order.

And Jason's idea of loading cased plasma torpedoes onto frigates had quickly been refined into a new system. The tiny landing bays on the frigates were installed with a very simple and very small launcher system that didn't interfere with zip ships landing in the bay, which would allow a frigate to carry two plasma torpedoes instead of zip ships. For non-military operations, the frigate would carry zip ships, but for planned battles, they would carry torpedoes. The munitions techs could set up the launcher system and load the torpedoes in about fifteen minutes, which made it super-easy to switch back and forth as required. The only real drawback to the system was that the frigate couldn't launch the torpedoes forward, they would eject from the landing bay on the starboard side of the ship and then activate and go after their target.

Because of the new way to use the landing bay, Juma and Naval Engineering were exploring the idea of redesigning a frigate so its landing bay was two small belly bays on either side of the particle beam collector array, one bay for each zip ship or torpedo, instead of a side-oriented dual bay, and the idea had potential. The zip ships or torpedoes would be held by clamps, then just drop through the open doors below them when they launched, and it would allow them to make the two single bays smaller by overall volume compared to the current bay, giving them more space in a ship where space was at a premium. It would require moving a whole lot of stuff around, to the point where refitting existing frigates to move the landing bay would be difficult—they'd literally be rebuilding the ship from section 14 to section 19—but it did have potential. Considerable potential. It would just come down to the impact studies Juma ordered to see if it was worth the cost of refitting, if it increased ship efficiency or combat capability enough to justify the refit.

Even if the refit of existing frigates wasn't recommended, new frigates would be built with the dual belly bay design. So, Dellin had been ordered to temporarily cease production of all frigates once the current ones on the docks were built, Cybi and Naval Engineering were currently generating the blueprints for the Mark II frigate, and Cybi estimated that the first prototype would come off the docks in about two months. The redesign was sufficient to classify the new design as a new ship class.

Diplomacy wise, the council hadn't made official contact with the Board yet, but they were getting close. Simply put, until the Dreamers were all rescued, talking to the Board was pointless. They would not stop, not even entertain the idea of a treaty, until the Oracles were either rescued from ships or killed and the evacuated Dreamers were recovered. Only when the Dreamers were completely removed from Syndicate custody would the Confederation even sit down at the table with the Board, and that was a policy of which Jason mightily approved. Even the most peaceful of the members like Magran and Master Mo understood just how critical it was for lasting peace to remove the Dreamers from Syndicate control.

As far as the Oracles went, the CCM and KMS hadn't forgotten about them, and his new Special Ops unit was going to undertake their first round of extraction operations in about 17 hours. Oracles on four different ships had been located, Kimdori were in place to set beacons, but the extraction teams needed more time to drill to be ready. Since every super-ship had a unique construction, the teams had to prepare for each ship individually to know when, where, and how to strike. The Kimdori had sent the necessary plans and blueprints for them, and now the teams were preparing to go in after the Oracles. For maximum protection for an extraction team against enemy telepaths, all of the team members but one would be doing it by remote merge, and the one PIM rigger would be a top tier mindstriker to protect the Oracle from the Benga telepaths while they got her out. After the Oracle was extracted, the team would set a pretty powerful bomb and withdraw, then the bomb would go off and deal significant damage to the ship.

It wouldn't be quite as easy for them as it had been for Jason and Jenn, since they could attack the kill machines with telekinesis, but they had a plan to deal with the kill machines, and that was spiders. The infiltrators had brought spiders with them that they would release into the ship early

enough for the units to get into position inside the walls and in the Oracle chamber so they could attack and disable the power conduits, datalines, and kill machines on command. Jason had reviewed their overall strategy and plan, and he felt that the teams had a high chance of success.

It was after those missions that concerned him. They'd be revealing that trick to the Syndicate, and that meant that subsequent operations to extract Oracles were going to run into much more resistance.

The bomb idea was not going to be limited to extraction operations. Given the armor on a super-ship, the idea of having Kimdori infiltrators bring in powerful bombs using a beacon was being chewed on over at 3D. They were designing the most powerful bombs they could muster in something that two Gladiators or Knights could easily carry through a nexus bridge, set down and activate, and then retreat back to the Nexus station along with the Kimdori infiltrator. And there were some options, including the Syndicate's own favorite one.... antimatter. Two Knights could carry an antimatter bomb big enough to possibly destroy hundreds of decks, and the explosive shockwave, fire, and resulting deadly heating as the heat conducted through the superstructure and spread through the ship would kill far more enemy crew than those caught in the direct blast area. Setting off an antimatter bomb inside the armored hull of a super-ship was like sticking a firecracker inside an orange and setting it off, all that energy was contained within the armor, thus it would do incredible amounts of damage to the ship where it had the least protection.

Jason had thought that Lorna was overestimating how powerful the nexus bridge system was...and he was *wrong*. The idea of bridging an antimatter bomb *inside* a super-ship and setting it off made the nexus bridge suddenly one of the most dangerous assets in the Karinne arsenal. If the Kimdori picked the right place inside the ship, it could cripple it, maybe even make it effectively irreparable. Two riggers carrying a bomb could potentially knock out a ship the size of a small moon.

That was just fucking *nuts*.

A new report hit his inbox while he was going over the others, and while it was both personal and non-essential, it was very important to him. Red Horn sent a status update on the construction of his vacation house on Tir Tairngire, and they'd moved up the estimated time of completion by two

whole days. It was now scheduled to be complete in six days, but that was the project as a whole. The main house was officially complete, and the team had sent quite a few holos of it...and it was quite smashing. They'd already moved in the furniture Jyslin selected, so the house was completely finished, and Miaari had installed a caretaking staff of two maids, two chefs, and a groundskeeper in the house that would serve the visitors; Miaari was still the one in charge of hiring the personal staff of Jason and his family, for security reasons. On the defense side of it, Aya had selected and installed a permanent garrison of 18 guards for the house pulled not from her own Imperial Guard, but from the Karinne Marine Ducal Guard. The staff and guards would be at the house all the time, which was a pretty cushy assignment, truth be told. They didn't really have to do all that much, just keep the house ready for guests and protect it on a world where there were virtually no threats.

The house looked exactly like the presentation hologram, curving with the hillside, with the huge windows that dominated the side facing the ocean, the giant deck built out over the rocky shore that extended all the way out over the water. They had the evacuation bunker done, and most of the buildings and landscaping around the main house. They were still working on the hard shield generator and its building, retracting ground batteries, environmental reclamation building, and military asset hangar, and due to the fact that the enviro systems weren't ready yet, the house wasn't ready for use. They did, however, add a new building to the design, a large environmentally controlled one room building for the giant wolves not far from the landing pad, close to the main house. It was complete with an airskin shield over the entrance to keep out rain and bugs, comfy beds for sleeping and relaxing, controllable lights, and access to unlimited fresh, clean water. They'd even installed an ice machine, since the wolves seemed to delight over ice. At first, the Master Builder had been insulted at the idea of just building them a sheltered nook on the side of the house, so he instead built the wolves their own house, complete with some comforts and amenities. And the entire construction team was happy to do the extra work, because they'd all become quite good friends with the wolves.

The report said that they'd have the enviro building done and all the systems finished in three days, which would allow them to use it, but the rest of it wouldn't be done for six...and Aya probably wouldn't allow them

to go there until the hard shield and ground batteries were installed and working. Still, it would be ready for Jyslin's planned party after the championship match.

He ended his split and returned most of his attention to the conversation, which really wasn't all that serious. When it came to the little clique of Jason, Kreel, and Krirara, it rarely was. Well, that clique had expanded to include Dahnai, and now Enva was worming her way into it. Enva did get along very well with them, and she didn't take herself all that seriously, so it wasn't like she was a weight dragging down their group dynamic. "Just got a report on the vacation house," Jason announced. "The Makati say it'll be done in six days, so it looks like Jyslin's party is on. That's a good four days before the championship match."

That'll give your people more than enough time to get the house ready, Enva agreed with a nod.

Miaari has a staff hired and there already, getting the house set up. Luckily, Jys isn't planning anything insanely garish or ridiculous for the party, just an intimate little gathering of a couple of hundred people to either celebrate winning the crown or drown their sorrow. I may have the Makati install suicide nets under the edge of the deck if the Paladins lose, he mused, which made Kreel laugh.

A couple hundred?

Yeah, she's inviting the players, coaches, front office staff, and their families, as well as the girls on the practice squad. They get championship pendants along with the rest of the team. Add in the strip girls, the kids, and who I'm inviting, and yeah, it'll be around two hundred.

[Holy Trelle!] Jenn boomed over the Generation-only section of the biogenic network, broadcasting it to anyone who could hear. *[Meya just proposed!]*

[It's about time,] Jezzi retorted. *[You better have said yes, bro.]*

[Stop trying to run my life, sis,] he shot back.

[Well, did you say yes or what?] Kaili asked.

[Of course I did. And shut up, Jezzi,] he threatened, which caused a whole lot of amusement to ripple through the network, followed up by a

cascade of congratulations.

[Looks like you're moving to the other side of the fence, Jenn,] Abri called.

[More like Meya's moving over to my side,] he answered.

[Yeah, good luck with that,] Jason had to interject.

[Meya's house is way too small.]

[Then have Red Horn build a bigger one. You two can stay over in your house while they do it, then move back.]

[That's not a bad idea.]

That was good news, as far as Jason was concerned. Meya and Jenn were a good match, and it was about damn time the strip girls started to get married. Hopefully Meya's marriage was the first of many to come, because if Meya could get married, then any girl on the strip could get married.

[So, the big question is, who gets Jenn's old house?] Maila injected cheekily. *[He's got one of the biggest yards in the neighborhood.]*

[You think I'm giving up my Housing Authority claim? Think again,] Jenn retorted. *[I don't care if I'm moving, that's my house, and I'm keeping it. I'll let Jayce use it as a guest house or something, since it's right beside the gate, but I'm not giving up my claim.]*

"Jayce," Kreel prompted, nudging him.

"Sorry, just listening to the news. Seems Jenn and Meya just got engaged," he announced.

"Really? That's good news," Krirara said. "I like both of them."

"Jenn's pretty awesome," Kreel agreed.

If they hold to Faey custom, they'll be married in a matter of days, Enva noted.

Yah. When a Faey woman gets a promise out of a man, she moves fast to secure it, Jason nodded. *They'll be married as soon as Meya can book a templar—no wait, Meya is an Arissi, so she'll book a high priestess too—and arrange space for the ceremony.*

Well, aren't we about to have a big party on Tir Tairngire? Kreel asked. *Wouldn't that be a place they could have the ceremony?*

Jason glanced at him. *That's not a bad idea, but the party may be a bit of a downer if the Paladins lose,* he answered.

Well, the wedding can boost spirits, Krirara predicted.

I'll ask, let's see what Meya says. Hold on. [Meya.]

[*Did Jenn already blab?*]

[*Of course he did, he's an incorrigible gossip,*] he replied impishly. [*How about it if you have the ceremony on Tir Tairngire during the championship game after-party?*]

[*Oooh, I like that!*] she replied immediately. [*We can get married under the tree!*]

[*And spend your honeymoon there at the vacation house. You'll be its first official guests*]

[*You got yourself a deal, Jayce!*] she declared. [*Lemme call the cathedral to get a priestess and the abbey to get a Templar.*]

[*You may as well book all three, Jenn is a Demirite,*] Jason reminded her. [*He'll want a prelate.*]

[*Trelle is that man high maintenance,*] Meya complained, which made Jason laugh aloud.

Meya liked the idea, so we're gonna have a wedding after the party. Or during it, or whatever, he announced.

Good, I'll be happy to attend, Enva declared.

And who said you're invited, Enva? he challenged.

Why Jason, are you saying that I'm not invited? she asked innocently, widening her vertically-slitted, cat-like green eyes. She then gave him the most outrageously fake sad eyes and quivered her upper lip, and even whimpered piteously. It was such a masterful performance that both Kreel and Krirara burst into uncontrollable laughter.

"Now I know why I don't mess with Sha'i-ree!" Kreel wheezed.

I don't know why I put up with you, woman! You're as bad as a Faey!
Jason snapped at her.

Nobody is that bad, Enva protested, which made them all burst into more laughter when Mai slapped Enva on the back of the head as she passed behind the couch, doing it gently so her armored hand didn't hurt her. *Ow! Mai, that was rude!*

So were you, she replied, glancing back at her with a smirk.

And I thought the Imperial Guard were professionals!

Some things demand answering, Aya called with a slight smile, backing up her guard.

Well, I guess I should welcome you to the family, Enva, Jason noted dryly. *The guards don't show just anyone that they're all a bunch of meanies.*

We won't discuss what they've done to Jason over the years. We have to maintain what little dignity he has left, Krirara added impishly.

Bite me, Krirara.

By the time they were in orbit around Draconis, they had everything arranged. Jyslin, Meya, and Jenn had ironed out enough details to have a timeline, which would basically be that they would have the ceremony almost immediately after arriving at the vacation house, and the party would be part reception and part either celebration or consolation. They boarded a heavily armored executive dropship, which Jason piloted with Aya in the copilot's chair, and it only took about fifteen minutes for them to land on the Imperial pad on top of the stadium. White armored guards stood sentry on the pad, and one of them approached as Jason opened the hatch. It was Captain Lara, who was the detachment commander of the guards that guarded the Imperial Skybox. They actually lived in the skybox, dispatched to the post the same way Aya was dispatched to Karis, so there was an Imperial Guard presence in the skybox and the stadium at all times. Lara commanded a detachment of 18 Imperial Guard that protected the skybox, and to a lesser extent the stadium, as one of Dahnai's holdings. There were far more than 18 guards here right now, but Lara's 18 guards were always here, protecting the skybox when the Empress wasn't here to make sure it was secure and in order when she was. When the Empress attended a

match, Lara was the one in command of all guards on post. This was *her* post, and she had command...unless a Major or the Colonel herself was part of the traveling guard retinue, of course. *Lara, good to see you*, Jason greeted as he came down the steps behind Enva. He'd always rather liked Lara.

You as well, your Grace, she replied. Lara was a major cutie, with the kind of face and slim body that would make anyone not believe in a million years that she was an Imperial Guard. But not only was she an Imperial Guard, she was one of their best, which was why she was a Captain. There were 60 Captains in the Imperial Guard, 20 Majors, and only one Colonel, who commanded the entire organization. *Her Majesty is in the skybox and awaiting your arrival. If you would follow me, please*, she prompted, motioning towards the elevator that would take them to the skybox with a hand. *Sergeant Kodi, raise the hard shield*. Seconds later, a hard shield winked into existence in a dome over the landing pad.

Dahnai took his hands and kissed him on the cheek when they came out of the elevator. "Hey love," she said with a smile. "Is Jyslin drunk yet?"

He laughed. "She might be by now," he replied. "She stayed behind to celebrate with the team."

"I know. Congratulations, by the way. That was one hell of a match. I expect the championship match against the Immortals to be just as good."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," he told her with a grin. "The Immortals haven't won the golden wreath yet."

"Pfft, they will," she said confidently.

"You're forgetting about the bet," Jason told her. "If the Tigers lose, Yila might murder her entire team on live interstellar viddy. And I'm sure she's made that abundantly clear to them in the locker room."

That made Dahnai burst into laughter. "Maybe, but it won't save them," she replied.

"Hey baby, pay attention to me!" Symone demanded, pushing Jason out of the way. That made Dahnai laugh again, and she gave his *amu dozei* a hug.

“Let’s move out of the doorway and let everyone settle in,” Dahnai said, patting Symone’s shoulders. “The match is going to start in about ten minutes.”

Dahnai had Kellin, Sirri, Maer, Raisha, and Miyai with her, and no doubt had Kaen in the nursery to let him sleep, since Saelle and Evin were also here. The toddlers were sitting in an open area to the side of the viewing seats playing with toys. In addition to Dahnai’s family and Saelle’s family, and to Jason’s surprise, Sk’Vrae and Grayhawk were sitting with the entire Highborn Council. The notable absence in the skybox was Yila, but she wasn’t here due to an old tradition that was a bit cheesy, there to remind the minor house Grand Duchesses of their place. Only Highborn Grand Duchesses were invited to the Empress’ skybox.

“Grayhawk, I didn’t expect to see you here,” Jason said as he sat down on the other side of Kellin, following a long-standing seating tradition in the Imperium. Sirri sat at her mother’s right as the Crown Princess, Kellin at her left as Dahnai’s husband, and Jason sat beside Kellin as Dahnai’s *amu dozei*. The seat to Sirri’s right would be for Miyai, as she was the next Princess in the line of succession, but Miyai was too young to want to sit there and watch batchi, so Shya was sitting there with Rann to her right. Shya was no longer in the line of succession, but her status as a Princess gave her the right to sit beside her sister. Were Sirri married, her husband would be sitting to her right and Shya would be sitting on the other side of him.

Poor Maer would no longer be allowed to sit in the front row once he was married, but he wasn’t sitting there now anyway. Since his fiancée was present, he was sitting with her in the second row instead of taking what would normally be his place on the end of the front row. As a boy, even as a Prince of the Imperium that was still in the House of Merrane, he still didn’t matter as much as the girls in the Imperial family. All his sisters got to sit closer to Dahnai.

Seriously, sometimes being the son of the Empress sucked far more than being the son of a commoner. At least a commoner’s son wasn’t treated like an afterthought, then shipped off to another house as a political pawn the moment he turned 15.

“I’m rather fond of batchi, Jason,” Grayhawk told him. “I find it as exciting as *shiziki*, and Dahnai was gracious enough to extend an invitation.”

“I was already on Draconis, and Dahnai invited me to this event,” Sk’Vrae said. “I admit to not being a fan of sports, but the company is worth the ordeal.”

“We’ll make sure you’re not bored, Sk’Vrae,” Kreel said with a toothy grin as he sat down in the second row, beside Carissa.

“You two excited for the ceremony, Maer?” Jason asked, turning and looking at him.

“I’m just glad we finally have a date, Uncle Jason,” he replied modestly, patting his fiancée’s hand. “Mom kept pushing it back, I was starting to think she was trying to sabotage the marriage.”

“I was *not*!” Dahnai protested. “It just took much longer than we expected to get the security organized.”

“This time next month, we’ll be married,” Delia said, giving Maer a warm look. Dahnai had told him that Delia seemed quite honestly fond of Maer, and that their marriage might evolve into love...at least after Maer grew up a little more. Given the age difference between them, he didn’t see romance blooming out of it until Maer was more emotionally mature.

Maer was back in the palace until the wedding, and Jason wondered how Dahnai and the girls were handling that. Maer didn’t know they were Generations, and they couldn’t tell him. They had to keep it a secret from him, and he wondered how much trouble that was causing them. Fortunately, Raisha and Miyai didn’t really understand what had happened, and had been kept mostly in the dark, so they were no threat to the secret. Maer and Sirri were very close, so Sirri was the one probably having the hardest time with it. No doubt they’d spent almost all their free time together since he came back.

The match started not long after everyone got settled in and servants brought them drinks and snacks, but Jason wasn’t nearly as involved as he’d been with the Paladins match. He paid just enough attention to not be rude as he went back to reports and projects, one of which was a bit personal. His personal Knight exomech had been delivered to the garage

back home, one of the first of the Knights built on Karis to come off the line and built with a tactical gestalt...though Dahnai didn't know that. MRDD had reverse engineered the Knight, and now they were producing their own. They were still buying Knights from the Imperium to get the inventory numbers up to where Sioa and Juma wanted them, but those they were refitting with KMS technology, so they were effectively rebuilding them after taking delivery. It had taken MRDD a little while to design the mecha's internals to make room for the tactical gestalt, but they'd managed to fit in the gestalt without removing any systems the way they had to with a Gladiator. Gladiators were basically just walking gestalts, they had virtually no internal armament. MRDD had done it by using an aggregate tactical gestalt. It wasn't one unit, it was six different smaller units placed where there was available room and all linked together, and it had enough combined amplifier stacks to make the tactical in it just as powerful as the one in a Juggernaut. It was a very clever solution to the tricky problem that had been refitting a Knight with a tactical, and it turned a Knight into a mecha just as dangerous as a Juggernaut when piloted by a Generation. Maybe even more so, since the IP carapace armor made it just as rugged as a Juggernaut while being faster and more agile. The Juggernaut had the edge in raw firepower, but firepower wasn't as important when it came to a tactical gestalt. The gestalt *was* the firepower.

So, he'd have that little fun distraction waiting for him when he got home. He was already rated on a Knight, but he needed to break in his personal mecha...which was just an excuse to take it up to the firing range on Joint Base Alpha and blow shit up. The Knight would be a toy more than anything else, given his preference for his Titan, but if he ever needed it, he'd have it.

He was nearly halfway through some routine paperwork Chirk sent to his gestalt by the time the fourth division started, and he started paying attention to the match, because it was both getting interesting and time was running out. The score was tied 11-11 when he put his paperwork away, with 13:21 to go. And because he'd gotten interested in the match, he was a bit honestly perturbed when Cybi called him. *[Jason, Zaa needs to talk to you right now,]* she communed.

[Oh, come on, seriously? It's tied with five minutes left! What's it about?]

[I don't know. She didn't tell me, she just told me to tell you.]

[I can commune—]

[In person,] Cybi elaborated. [She's waiting for you at the Hearth on Kimdori Prime.]

[Holy shit, she means business,] he blurted. [Tell her I'll be on the way as soon as I can get out of here. And send a ship over here to pick me up. The others can get back on the Kinai.]

[I can get the Arabax there in about ten minutes,] Cynna offered, cutting in. [It's the closest battleship class vessel to the Draconis Stargate.]

[Do it,] he ordered. Aya, he sent privately.

What is it, Jason?

I have to go to Kimdori Prime, like right now, he told her. Zaa needs to see me, and it must be super-important if she's calling me to the Hearth itself. The Arabax is coming to pick me up. I want you to take the kids home, I won't need guards to go to Kimdori Prime. That way none of you have to decontaminate.

Well...alright, she acceded. It's safe enough there for you. And you should be safe on the Arabax.

Shya gave him a quizzical look, but the direct stare he leveled on her kept her quiet.

[Cybi, tell Sevi I'll rendezvous with the Arabax as soon as they reach orbital distance. And tell Zaa I'll be on the way as soon as it gets here.]

[I'll tell her now.]

Aya, what assets are here right now I can borrow? he asked her.

The Imperial Guard has a small garrison here. A few exomechs, a few Raptors.

Have them get a Raptor on the pad immediately, a two-seater if they have one, so a guard can fly up with me and bring the Raptor back after I board. Have the Wolf and corvette escorts come down and meet me on the way up to escort me to the Arabax.

I'd prefer you wait until the escorts are in place.

Fine. You explain to the Denmother why she had to wait, he sent bluntly.

Ah...no.

Then stuff it, he said as he stood up. *Lara, did Aya—* he sent openly.

She did. I'm having a two-seat Raptor land on the pad right now.

"What's the matter, love?" Dahnai asked.

"I just got summoned," he said. "Kids, Aya's gonna get you home, don't give her any trouble."

"Right *now*? You're leaving now?"

"I have to," he replied, stepping away from the seats. "It's an emergency."

"There's only four minutes left!"

"And I need those four minutes to be in position for the *Arabax* to pick me up from orbit," he countered.

"What's this about?"

"I'm honestly not sure. Zaa called me, and she won't tell me anything until we're face to face. She won't even let me use a bionoid," he elaborated as he started for the elevator.

[Maybe we should go too,] she communed to him.

[No,] he returned forcefully. *[I still have my secrets, Dahnai.]*

Aya trusted the rest of the Imperial Guard, so it was a white-armored guard that was in the cockpit when he climbed up and into the second seat, one that he didn't know. *Strap in, your Grace,* she ordered as the canopy closed and the fighter's skids lifted up off the pad. *Where am I going?*

Straight up, he answered. *We're going to rendezvous with the Arabax, so when it enters the system, I'll get them to send a nav vector to you. But for now, get us out of the atmosphere.*

Understood, your Grace. Go ahead and link your gestalt to the fighter's computer, so it can access KMS communal telemetry. That will let the Arabax send the vectors directly to the fighter's nav.

Good idea.

Barely seven minutes later—time he spent watching vidy of the end of the batchi match, witnessing the Tigers defeat the Immortals 14-12—they were in space and turning towards the tactical battleship as it approached the planet. Jason had to chuckle a bit at the outcome of the match. He had no doubt that he was very glad he wasn't in that skybox at the moment, because no doubt Dahnai was utterly pissed off. And he could have probably heard Yila's sigh of relief all the way across the stadium. It meant that the Paladins would face the Tigers in the championship, and that was going to be quite the interesting contest. It was the Paladins' system against the Tigers' massive payroll, by far the biggest payroll in the IBL, and Jason felt that the Paladins would have the edge. It was highly paid prime talent against a *team*, and the *team* was usually the winner in those situations, much akin to the Terran NBA's San Antonio Spurs. They were the best team with players nobody ever heard about, because they had a system, they adhered to that system, and they chose players through both the draft and free agency that worked best within that system. San Antonio's system let them compete against teams that simply stacked high-priced talent. They didn't always win, but they did always compete, allowing players with much less overall talent pose a viable threat to those superstar teams.

The difference between the Spurs and the Paladins was that the talent on the Paladins was much higher quality than the equivalent talent on the Spurs, but those players were still carefully chosen to play within the Paladins' *system*. So, that put IBL-level quality players in a system that played to their strengths, and that made them *fucking nasty*, as the team's season record and golden wreaths attested.

The Raptor landed in the starboard bow landing bay barely 15 minutes after taking off, and the guard pilot didn't even get out of the fighter. As soon as Jason had climbed down the ladder, she closed the canopy and flew back out of the landing bay. [*Sevi, set course for Kimdori Prime and get us there yesterday,*] he ordered.

[We already have the coordinates locked in. We'll be going to mode one to get to jump distance as soon as the Raptor is clear. I'll send down a duty jumpsuit so you don't have to lose your clothes.]

[Sounds good. I really don't want to lose these shoes, I just got them broken in.]

He was in a standard technician's duty jumpsuit uniform, and in a Wolf fighter and executing a controlled descent into the atmosphere of Kimdori Prime barely 30 minutes later. Since he wasn't in armor, he was up in the wizzo cockpit and controlling the fighter mainly with his gestalt, which seemed almost bizarre to him after so many years of going PIM in a mecha that used an internal armored box cockpit. It seemed almost like he was flying one of his Novas instead of a Wolf. Denmother Zaa and Denfather Grun were standing on the landing pad outside the modest house that was the Hearth when he landed, and they walked up to him as he stood up in front of the seat in the cockpit and rose up out of it, standing on a very small flying platform that had deployed from the floor of the cockpit. Wolf fighters had no retracting ladder for the wizzo to get in and out, so that tiny flying platform was the only way he was going to easily get to the ground. That was why they were designed into the cockpit floor, just in case the grav engines in a wizzo's armor were damaged "Denmother, I got here as fast as I could," he greeted her in Kimdori as the platform landed, and he stepped up and let her put her hand on his neck in greeting. "What's so important that you'd drag me out of the fourth division of a bracket championship game?"

"You'll support my decision very soon," she said as Grun greeted him, then the two Kimdori led him towards the modest home that was the Hearth. He could feel the radiation of the system on his skin through the uniform, like concentrated sunlight warming him, and it reminded him that were he not a Generation, he'd be dead within a half an hour just from standing on the surface of the planet. And he'd be dead in seconds if he was in orbit on an unshielded ship. Zaa led them into the underground section of the Hearth, leading him through the large living room that held the literal Hearth, and down a corridor to one of the high security briefing rooms in the underground section of the complex. Miaari was sitting in the room when he arrived, as was the albino Kimdori, Maraa, one of the Gamekeepers in Andromeda.

"Maraa, what are you doing here?" he asked as one of the Hearth's guards closed the door behind them, and the room shifted into secure mode. "I thought you were in Andromeda."

“The information I brought back had to be delivered by courier, your Grace,” she answered. “And Denmother bade me bring it in person.”

“It is Maraa’s information that brought us here, Jason,” Zaa told him as they sat down and the white-furred Kimdori stood up, moving to the front of the small room. “You may begin, Gamekeeper.”

“Yes, my Denmother,” she said demurely. “Two hours ago, your Grace, my pack that have managed to get penetration into the highest circle of Consortium government warned me that they are about to try to contact the Confederation and try to negotiate. They seek to ally with us against the Syndicate in our future military operations, with the goal of buying as much time as possible for them to evacuate as many civilians as possible to the Milky Way.”

“Bullshit is that gonna happen,” Jason growled. “Not after what they pulled over here.”

“That is a moot point at the moment, your Grace, it is what else my pack has learned that matters. Your Grace, they know about the drives.”

“What?”

“We have *all* overlooked something very important about the Consortium, your Grace. They have *clairvoyants*,” she stressed. “When we crossed over from our galaxy to Andromeda and began to use hyperspace probes, Kimdori scout ships, and KMS frigates to recon important Syndicate star systems the Consortium actively surveil with their psionics, the clairvoyants took notice. They began to actively track those ships with their clairvoyance, which led them to Prakka, and when those ships returned home to the Milky Way without the use of a Stargate, it revealed our secret to them,” she told him soberly. “Neither Kimdori stealth field technology nor Karinne CMS can hide a ship from them, they can see through it. This was information we did not acquire until it was too late,” she said, a bit guiltily. “What we have learned is that the Consortium knows about the drives, and they have correctly deduced that only we have them. Your Grace, this poses a direct threat to the secrecy of the drives. If we engage the Consortium in any sort of diplomatic negotiations, they could reveal them to the rest of the Confederation. They don’t know that we keep them

secret, and if they did, they could use that information as blackmail to try to force us to help them.”

Maraa was dead-on with her prediction. If the Consortium knew that they kept the drives a secret, they’d try to blackmail them into helping them. The Consortium wasn’t stupid, they’d understand just how powerful the drives were, and would understand exactly *why* the Karinnes kept them a secret. Maraа’s information meant that they had to be very, *very* careful about how they dealt with the Consortium, but it also wasn’t quite as grim as they thought it was. “That’s gonna make things much more complicated, but it also more or less solidifies my original plan. We have to make absolutely fucking sure that *we* are the ones that negotiate with the Consortium, not the Confederation. We’ll have to move forward with my original idea, Denmother,” he said, looking over at her. “I’ll have to convince the council to let *me* deal with the Consortium. We can’t let them anywhere near those talks, to prevent the Consortium from blackmailing us into a bad deal. So long as the only people on our side of the table is you and me, we can keep the drives a secret.”

“That may not be easy, cousin,” Zaa said. “But you’re right. We can’t allow the Consortium to make contact with the Confederation.”

“That will not be easy, my Denmother,” Maraа said. “The Consortium is as we speak attempting to do so. They are preparing a mission to send one of their smallest, fastest ships to within gravband range of the only system in Andromeda they can reach with a CCM presence, Atrovēt. The Consortium has gravband comm technology, so they can make contact with the CCM from outside interdiction. That is why I felt this information was so critical,” she explained. “They know they can’t contact the CCM at Prakka due to the system’s unique properties scrambling gravband, but the CCM has a sizable force at *Atrovēt*. We may be facing a scenario where the Consortium contacts the CCM and attempts to arrange a diplomatic conference, and we may have no control over what happens if they do. That would be a matter for the council to decide.”

“Well...fuck,” Jason said in disgust, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. She was right. There was a very large fleet of CCM vessels at Atrovēt, there to both protect the evacuation of the Dreamers and conduct scientific research in the system. And the Consortium had

gravband, so they could make contact with the CCM from two *fucking* sectors away. They didn't have to jump that ship to Atrovet, they just had to get it within two sectors to achieve real-time communications with any fucking ship in the CCM task force. And if they didn't mind a time delay, they could be *five* sectors away. That was such a huge area, the KMS would never get to it and destroy it in time for it to try to make contact, and he might have a lot of fucking explaining to do in front of the Confederate Council if he continually attacked and destroyed Consortium ships trying to establish contact with the Confederation. Virtually everyone on the council saw the Consortium as an enemy, but they'd also figure out quickly that Jason was actively trying to prevent the Confederation and the Consortium from talking to each other. That would make some of them suspicious, even rulers that were very close to him, like Dahnai.

"Do you think we can convince the CCM to pull out of Atrovet?" Jason asked Zaa. "If we can pull the CCM out of gravband range, we keep control of the situation."

"That would depend on how effective you can be at convincing Lorna, without giving her a satisfactory explanation as to why you are doing it," she answered. "But that may not even be enough, because the rulers that own those fleets can simply issue orders to them to remain at Atrovet directly. Remember, cousin, that many of the CCM ships are there to make sure the Dreamers do in fact end up on Tir Tairngire. Some of them suspect that you might try to spirit them to Karis and use their precognition to your advantage. Your virtual abduction of Aria without council input or approval has made them suspicious of your intentions. They are keeping an eye on you."

"I know," he grunted. "And we can't jam gravband, that'll piss Lorna off and make them ask even more questions. Fuck. Fuck! I don't see how we can stop this!" he said, standing up and pacing behind the table. "We can't stop that ship before it sends a message. Sure, we can jump something there and destroy it, but not before it gets the message off. Then they'll just send another messenger, and another, and another, until it becomes plain as fucking day that I'm actively trying to stop the Confederation from talking to them. What if we move forward with my idea now?" he proffered. "Ask the council to let me negotiate with the Consortium to stop them from sending their colonization force to the Milky Way?"

“That...I am not sure,” she said honestly. “But my educated guess is that they wouldn’t let you do it alone. Mesaiima and Ethikk have established themselves as the council’s premiere diplomats, and it would be almost certain that the council would demand they go with you.”

“Mesaiima...I think she’d be trusted to keep what she learns secret. But Ethikk...no,” he growled. “The Alliance would kill to get their hands on drive technology. So would most of the empires in the Confederation bigger than the Jobodi.”

“Then it sounds like we have three choices, cousin,” Zaa said grimly. “We say nothing and allow events to unfold, hoping that the secret is not revealed, we reveal the drives on our own terms...or we launch an invasion of Consortium territory to trick them into thinking that no treaty can be negotiated.”

“I don’t want to start a second war,” he growled, turning and walking the other way, establishing his pacing path. “Even if we do vastly outmatch the Consortium right now, we don’t have the ships or the assets to fight a war on two fronts when one of those fronts is the Syndicate. Besides, we couldn’t keep that war a secret. Lorna has her claws dug too deeply into the KMS, she’ll see too many ships off the board for us to explain it away, and she’ll want to know what’s going on. KMS ships are the fulcrum of most of her battle plans. The only possible way we could do this would be to chase down and destroy those Consortium ships *before* they get into gravband range,” he mused, stopping and looking up at the ceiling. “A tackler and a frigate could get in their jump vector and knock the ship out of hyperspace and destroy it. It takes about 183 minutes for a ship to cross Andromeda with standard jump engines, and that would give us enough time to see the ship coming and get a tackler into its path. But that’s not a guarantee,” he growled. “Sure, we’ll get the first couple of ships, but after that they’ll realize that we’re trying to stop them from communicating with the Confederation, and they’ll understand why we’re doing it. They’ll employ Sha Ra’s strategy, jump short distances and change direction to prevent us from being able to predict their course and get in front of them. If they do that, there’s no guarantee we can stop them.”

“Another option would be to contact the Consortium secretly and make your offer to them, on the condition that they say nothing,” Miaari offered.

“We send them to another galaxy where the Syndicate cannot follow, something they *know* we can do because of their knowledge of the drives, then leave them alone. In return, they say nothing to the Confederation about the drives.”

“That...that is a viable option, Mee,” he said after a moment. “But it does have massive risk. If the council finds out, they very well may declare war on *us*. We’d be committing treason against the Confederation by making secret deals with the enemy. And if they find out about the drives, they’ll use it as the pretense to do just that, so they can get their hands on Karinne tech. And to think, I’ve given them rail cannons, I’ve given them diffusers, I’ve given them IP armor, and they may use all of it against us,” he said grimly.

“There is one final option, if I may be so bold, your Grace, my Denmother,” Maraa spoke up. “As the Denmother mentioned, we reveal it ourselves. That way we have more control over the outcome, and the Consortium cannot blackmail us. It also presents the least risk that things go horribly wrong.”

“We have kicked around strategies for doing that. Contingency plans for if the secret got out,” Jason grunted, turning and looking at the three Kimdori. “We’d have to close off Karis again...maybe even piss everyone off by kicking them out of Kosigi, at least if Miaari, Cynna, and Dellin couldn’t absolutely guarantee that they could keep the drives safe from espionage attempts.”

“My opinion is that it can be done, but it’s not a recommendation I can make with complete certainty alone. I’ll need to discuss it with Dellin and Cynna,” Miaari told them. “They control Kosigi, and that’s where most of our security upgrades would be instituted.”

“I know. We’d have to massively increase security around the warehouses holding drives and drive parts, treat them like biogenic units.”

“It does present the least risk of betrayal and warfare, as Maraa surmised,” Grun said absently, scratching his muzzle in thought. “Jason is right, there is grave risk in trying to contain the secret by either engaging in clandestine warfare with the Consortium or secretly negotiating with them. Both could easily lead us to war with the Confederation. If we reveal it

ourselves, we can make all the appropriate preparations to maximize the protection of the technology. I believe that everyone in this room will agree that we cannot give drive technology to *anyone*. They are not ready for it.”

“Amen,” Jason agreed as Zaa nodded. “Besides, none of them can even *use* it. The only empire that could conceivably use drives with their current technology is the Ruu. They’re the only ones with both sufficient power generation tech and computers powerful enough to govern the drives in mode three. They’re also about the only empire I’d even *consider* sharing drive tech with, given who they are. But still, as much as I respect the Ruu and consider Observer A a friend, no. Their actions would be my responsibility, and I won’t break the oaths I took when I became the Grand Duke.”

“We should discuss our options with additional input,” Zaa decided. “I will summon Handgroom Kraal, and also Dellin, Cynna, and Cybi. What we do will depend on Dellin and Cynna’s expert opinions, so they should be here.”

“Have the CBIMs come using their bionoids, that’s more secure,” Jason suggested. “The link between them and their bionoids is about fifty times more secure than just them coming in through Kimdori’s biogenic network and manifesting holograms. Not even the other CBIMs can eavesdrop when they’re using their bionoids.”

Zaa nodded. “Dellin is one of yours, Jason. Order him in.”

“Yes ma’am.” He reached all the way back to Karis through Kimdori Prime’s biogenic network and got in touch with Dellin, who was off duty and in his quarters on Kosigi. He used the CBIM trick of manifesting a hologram into Dellin’s luxurious but scrupulously neat quarters, merging to the local node so that he could see and hear through the hologram, just like a CBIM. “*Dellin*,” he called.

“What is it, Jason?”

“*I need you on Kimdori Prime immediately*,” he answered. “*Get into your armor and board the Kamiata, I’m sure you know where it’s docked. As soon as Cybi and Cynna get their bionoids aboard the ship, you’ll leave. I’ll explain why you need to be here when you get here. I’m not discussing it over biogenic commune.*”

“That’s a bit of a strange order, Jason, but I won’t mind. I’ve always wanted to see Kimdori,” he said, looking to the side. A panel in the wall opened, and an armor stand holding his armor slid out.

“The Kimdori will relay landing instructions to the Kamiata when you reach orbit,” he continued. *“When you come down, make sure it’s just the three of you on the dropship.”*

“Alright.”

Jason ended the hologram, and while still merged to the biogenic node on Kosigi, he reached out to Karis and connected to the part of the biogenic network where only the sentient biogenic units and Jason had access, their very private, very secure, and very exclusive little part of the network..

[Cybi, Cynna, I need both of you to get your bionoids onto the Kamiata, we need you on Kimdori Prime. Dellin’s going to be coming with you, so ride down to the planet with him.]

[What’s going on, Jayce?] Cylan asked.

[I’ll explain everything in detail later, but the short of it is that the Consortium found out about the drives, thanks to their fucking clairvoyants. Denmother needs Dellin, Cybi, and Cynna here to provide some expert testimony so we can discuss our options.]

[Ouch. That’s not good,] Cyvanne injected.

[Fucking amen,] Jason agreed.

[My bionoid is looking at the ship right now, Jayce,] Cynna answered. *[I’ll be on board in just a moment.]*

[I’m in my skimmer and on the way to Kosigi now,] Cybi added.

[The rest of us will consider the issue and have some possible suggestions ready for you when you get back,] Cyra offered. *[But just from a brief glance at it, very few of those possibilities will be ones you’re going to like.]*

[You understand the situation well, Cyra,] Jason relayed with disgust staining his thought. *[This is one of those situations where we go with the least of the available evils.]*

He ended the merge and looked at the three Kimdori. “They’re on the way. They’ll probably be here in about an hour, Cybi has to get up to Kosigi. They’re coming in the fleet battleship *Kamiata*, so you can warn your traffic control they’re going to jump in.”

They discussed the problem in more detail as they waited, and almost exactly an hour later, during which Kraal arrived and was brought up to speed and joined the discussion, the Hearth’s guards escorted Dellin and the bionoids into the briefing room. Dellin was in his armor, wearing a helmet with a transparent faceplate rather than a combat helmet, and he looked quite intrigued to be here. Cybi and Cyra were wearing the same style of standard KMS technician’s jumpsuit uniforms Jason wore, mainly because they knew that they’d have to destroy any clothes they wore here due to the radiation. By now, Jason’s own jumpsuit was probably so irradiated that it presented a serious health risk to anyone not a Kimdori, Jakkan, or Generation.

They explained the issue to Dellin and the bionoids, then they returned to the debate. That debate ran for nearly five hours, through a dinner that was delivered into the briefing room by the Hearth’s guards, and through several dozen attempts by both Jyslin and Dahnai to find out why he wasn’t home yet. They discussed each of their available options in great detail, but in the end, all nine of them had to agree that the only real option was to reveal the drives themselves, which presented both the least risk of everything going to hell and the best means to protect the technology. Cynna and Dellin were certain that they could protect the drives in Kosigi from the other empires that had access to the facility the same way they protected biogenic units, and that assurance was the main reason they made the decision they did.

“Then it’s agreed. Jason will reveal the drives,” Zaa called, and they all nodded in agreement. “But he only reveals that the *Karinnes* have the drives. He keeps the fact that we also have drives secret. Dellin, Cynna, Handmaiden, it falls to you,” she said, looking at them. “Make the necessary preparations on Kosigi.”

“We can have things done in about six days, my Denmother,” Miaari answered.

“Aye, we’ll need to reorganize our warehouse space for drives and drive parts, put them in the same warehouse blocks where we keep biogenic units and systems. That way we can extend that security to the drives. The Confederation didn’t think they were all that important when they thought we were just installing Hrathrari-based translight drives on our ships. When they find out they’re much more than that, they’ll try to steal either the plans or the physical pieces to reverse engineer the technology.”

“And when we get everything done and Handmaiden Miaari signs off on the security, Jason can do the deed,” Cynna said, looking towards him.

“Cybi, you can create a new subsection in the Academy mainframe for scientific data we gather from exo-galactic exploration,” Zaa told her. “Giving the others access to select data we gather will counter some of their arguments. Jason can simply claim that the exploration data we Kimdori gather was done so by the KES and make it available to the others.”

“That will go a long way to placating the more scientific empires, like the Ruu, the Subrians, and the Nine Colonies,” she agreed with a nod. “And we can further placate them by offering Confederation scientists slots on KES scout ships doing exo-galactic work.”

“That’s a possibility, I’ll go over it with Meya and Myra,” Jason said. “As long as Miaari’s pack can screen them to make sure they’re not a security threat, I wouldn’t be opposed to the idea.”

“This decision does give us the option to move forward with Jason’s plan, but in a way that we don’t have to hide it,” Kraal offered. “The Council may very well be quite amenable to the idea of removing the threat of the Consortium’s colonization force if we offer to send them far, far away and let them start over in a place where neither the Syndicate nor the Confederation is a threat to them. That makes both sides happy.”

“I’m going to bring that up after I reveal the drives,” Jason nodded.

“Then it sounds like we have a plan of action,” Zaa declared. “And I find myself growing a bit weary, so I believe that this conference is concluded. Cybi, if you would, write up a detailed report of our discussions here and forward it to my office, so I may peruse and reflect upon it after I have a chance to rest.”

“Of course, Denmother,” she nodded. “I’ll have it in your inbox in a few moments.”

“I’ll get the warehouse changes started as soon as we get back,” Dellin declared as he stood up.

“I’m already working on the transition plan. I should have something solid to present to you by the time we’re home, Dellin,” Cynna told him.

“I’ll go with you. I need to be on Kosigi to oversee the changes to security,” Miaari told them.

“I think I’m not going to get out of my office until sometime tomorrow afternoon,” Jason grunted. “Cybi, warn Captain Koye we’ll be boarding in about half an hour, and that we’ll need to dispose of these,” Jason said, plucking at his jumpsuit. “And remember that you’ll need to decon along with us. The bionoids are irradiated.”

The trip back was subdued and pensive, with the bionoids, Miaari, and Dellin discussing the upcoming changes as Jason more or less stood in front of the window of the stateroom and looked out, both resigned and apprehensive. He knew this day may come, that the Confederation would find out about the drives, and it had always been his intention to more or less do what they’d decided to do, reveal them himself, on his own terms. But he hadn’t wanted to do it *now*. They were too new, and the house hadn’t fully adjusted to the fact that they had them quite yet, and the fact that they were embroiled in a war with the Syndicate would make the Confederation very pushy about them. He thought that maybe in a couple of years, as the Karinnes pushed further and further into the galactic cluster and supercluster, he would have to do it, but he hadn’t counted on the Consortium and their *fucking* clairvoyants. None of them had known that they could see through stealth fields and CMS, and none of them had even considered the possibility that frigates and Kimdori stealth ships would be noticed moving around Andromeda and tracked all the way back to the Milky Way.

Because of that, all his plans had been partially upended. They’d still continue with their plans to explore the supercluster with KES scout ships, but now they’d more or less be doing it with the entire Confederation looking over their shoulder. It meant that it was going to be harder to keep

what they discovered a secret, especially if a Confederation scientist was aboard the scout ship that made the discovery, and it vastly increased the risk that the Karinnes may run afoul of the other empires in the Confederation. There were a good three dozen of them that Jason knew would risk war with the Karinnes to get their hands on drive technology. A fleet of IP-equipped ships with *intergalactic* capability opened up so many options of expansion and conquest for them, and dreams of glory and spoils would drive some of them to desperate extremes.

Greed wasn't only a fatal flaw in the Benga.

Fuck, he was going to have to all but chain Anavan to a post. The Prakarikai were going to be the most dangerous little shits he'd have to keep his eyes on once they knew about the drives.

The wild card was going to be Dahnai. The fact that she was a Generation tied her and the Imperium much more closely to him, but he honestly wasn't sure how this was going to go. Before she was changed, he'd have been as wary of her as he would be Anavan, but now...he didn't know. She did understand how being a Generation changed her life and added responsibilities to it, but he didn't know if she truly understood the *essence* of what being a Generation meant. And the drives would answer that question for him, he supposed. If she tried to steal drive technology, then he would know that she truly hadn't learned anything, had not changed.

And that would break his heart.

But there was really no other option. They would either risk war with *everyone* over their attempts to keep the drive secret, up to possibly betraying the Confederation and destroying everything he had labored to build for years, or they would fall prey to Consortium extortion over that secret. The only real path they had before them was to reveal the drive, do it on their terms and with preparations in place before that secret was revealed.

If there was ever a time he wished he could ask Aria for a prediction... this was it.

Kaira, 30 Miraa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Monday, 3 March 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Kaira, 30 Miraa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Sora Karinne Memorial Complex, Karsa, Karis

He wasn't sure he'd *ever* been this reluctant to stand before the council.

This was a special session of the council, called by him, and called on Karis. As such, the Grand Duke Jason Augustus Fox Shaddale Karinne stood in the witness box to the side of the speaker's lectern and looked out over 154 bionoids and four flesh and blood people, Zaa, Dahnai, Kreel, and Krirara—naturally—and knew that there was no helping it. No matter how much he didn't want to do what he was about to do, he had no choice. And he dreaded it.

Dahnai and those on the council closest to him knew something serious was going on, because he'd not only been unavailable for the last six days, he wouldn't even answer their missives and messages. He'd been personally overseeing the reorganization of warehouse space in Kosigi and Miaari's security upgrades, so he knew with his own eyes that things were ready. And now they were seeing him not only in person in front of the council, but wearing his *formal robes*, wearing the *oye* wood medallion holding the house crest that the Parri *shaman* had made for him around his neck prominently displayed as it rested on his chest over his robes, something he almost never did. Much like Kreel, Jason often attended council sessions in a tee and jeans, even naked a few times, because he didn't put much importance on appearances, or pomp and circumstance. But here he was, wearing the most formal attire he possibly could, and for no reason that they could possibly fathom. And in a way, it set the stage. This was abnormal behavior from Jason Karinne, and that made all of them pay very close attention to him.

He leaned forward and put his hands on the rail of the witness box, then sighed and succumbed to the reality of the situation. Just standing there saying nothing wasn't going to fix anything. This was something that had to be done, and it was his responsibility as the Grand Duke Karinne to do it.

Potentially seal the fate of the House of Karinne and burn down everything he had worked so hard to build.

“I’m sure everyone is wondering why I called you here,” he began in a wooden tone. “I’ll get to that in a moment. What I will say now is that I want everyone in this room to understand something, right here, right, and never forget it. What I am about to say is the truth, and how I will act upon that information is a solemn vow. I mean what am I about to say, and don’t anyone in this room for one moment think that I will do anything other than exactly what I say I will do.” He paused a moment and stood upright, taking his hands off the rail, then tucked his hands into his opposite sleeves. “For the last two years, the House of Karinne has been working on a new type of ship engine, called a translight drive,” he began. “I’m sure most everyone in this room has heard of them. The Hrathrari employ translight drive technology, and in fact have some of the most advanced translight drive technology in the Confederation. We’ve been working to improve and expand on that technology, and the result are the translight drives we’ve installed on KMS vessels. You’ve no doubt read the reports from your generals that we use them to move back and forth between jump distance and a planet in a matter of seconds, and also use them for system to system travel to avoid wear and tear on our jump engines.

“What they haven’t told you, and what we haven’t told you, is what else they can do,” he continued, then he took a breath and exhaled. “We’ve built a new version of the translight drive that moves at FTL speeds in *hyperspace*, vastly increasing a ship’s jump speed.”

Observer A nearly swallowed his tongue gasping and jumped to his feet. “You solved Methrit’s Hyperspace Photonic Quantum Equation!” he nearly shouted.

“We did,” he acknowledged, nodding towards the Ruu.

“By the great spirit, Jason! I am impressed beyond all measure!”

“What does that mean in non-science-ese?” Kreel asked, looking back at Observer A.

“How fast, Jason? What was the final result?” A said, ignoring the Grimja.

“Two hundred and fifty light years per second, at least safely. Our fastest speed was nine hundred and twenty light years per second, but that literally destroyed both the jump engine and the drive, and damn near blew up the entire ship.”

The entire room just stared at him.

“Light exists in hyperspace, but in a highly erratic and energetic state. We developed a translight drive that can modulate light in hyperspace to produce an FTL effect, a translight state. And in the interests of security, that’s all I’m going to tell you about how it works,” he said bluntly. “The only other thing you need to know is that this drive gives the House of Karinne *intergalactic* capability. We’ve been using the one-way wormhole system as a cover for how we’ve *really* been moving Stargates and assets into the Strands of Trelle and Andromeda. Drive-equipped ships carried the supplies or towed the Stargates out there, we linked them, and that gave the Confederation access to those areas.

“I had no intention of telling any of you about the drives to protect my house from attempts to steal the technology or take it by force, but recent events have forced my hand,” he said bluntly. “It is my opinion that with the possible exception of the Ruu, you are *not ready* for this technology. You can’t even *use* this technology, if you installed it in your ships, it would melt your computers and make your power plants explode. We didn’t even feel you were ready to *know* about this technology, because now it puts me in the untenable position of having to keep it from you, and no doubt that’s going to create bad blood between the House of Karinne and some members of this council. So, let me put it on the table right here, right now, for everyone to hear and everyone to understand. Don’t ask for this technology. Don’t ask for information about it. Don’t even ask to see the drive housing. And know this, members of this council. Any attempt to steal or procure this technology from us will cause us to immediately declare war on you, and we will not stop until the House of Karinne completely destroys your empire’s space travel capability, both military *and civilian*. And we will *never* allow you to rebuild it,” he said in a powerful voice. “There will *never* be a peace treaty, and any attempt to build new ships will be met with immediate attack. We will banish you back to your planets and moons, and we will *never let you off of them again*. So think very, very carefully before you order your spies to Karis, ladies and

gentlemen,” he said in a flat voice, staring right at Anavan as he said it. “Else you will make an *eternal* enemy of the Karinnes, and our resolve will put the tenacity of the Jun to shame. You will be Graldux K’Vrart from that old Beyran fable, wearing your crown and carrying your golden scepter and strolling proudly through the ruins of the city you destroyed with your own pride and ambition.

“I know how I must sound to you, like I am the epitome of arrogance, talking down to the rest of you like you were not the powerful and esteemed rulers that you are, but it is the honest truth. Most of you are too aggressive, too war-like, for us to feel comfortable giving you something that would unleash you upon the entire galactic supercluster, because the harm you do out there would be *my responsibility*,” he said intensely. “My oaths as the Grand Duke Karinne forbid me from allowing our knowledge or technology to be allowed to allow one party to act against the will of another, except in the instance of self-defense. The first time one of you found some lonely planet with a pre-spacefaring society and conquered it, my oaths would be broken, and all their misery would be placed on *my* shoulders. And every person in this room knows that my position about this has not changed since the day the Confederation was formed. The House of Karinne is *neutral*, the House of Karinne does not allow its technology to be used to conquer and plunder. It is *only* used to advance the cause of learning, increase the quality of life for all beings, foster peace, and defend ourselves and our allies against those that would conquer us, would take away *our* freedom.”

He was silent a long moment, letting them absorb that. When he spoke again, it was with a softer tone, and more like himself. “While we won’t give you this technology, the House of Karinne does not object to you going *with* us as we leave the galaxy to explore,” he said strongly. “Our KES scout ships have room on them for scientists and researchers from your empires, and we would be amenable to taking them with us so your empires can explore and learn, just as we will. And in the future, we will open the path behind us by placing Stargates in other galaxies for Confederate use, giving you access to new galaxies, new territories to explore, and new worlds to colonize. But it will be done by the same very strict rules we impose on those that employ our technology to explore and colonize planets within our own galaxy,” he warned. “That means no conquering indigenous populations. You will bring no war to any planet beyond our galaxy, just as

we demand that you bring no war to any planet *within* the galaxy,” he said sternly. “In any case, we’ll be placing the data we collect during our explorations on the Academy mainframe for any with an interest in the subject to download and study. A new subtree database has been set up to archive the data, and with luck, we’ll be logging our first entries into the database within a month. We’ve taken our time to carefully prepare for this adventure, and the first drive-equipped scout ship will be arriving at its destination to begin exo-galactic research in five days.”

He gave a small shrug of his shoulders. “And that’s about all I have to say. A written report will be sent out as an official missive stating our positions in writing, spelling out clearly what I’ve just said. Those of you interested in getting scientists aboard scout ships doing exogalactic research need to contact KES headquarters, they have control of that process. Oh, and in five hours, the KMS *Tianne* will be making an exogalactic jump from Karis to Prakka to deliver supplies to the CCM forward bases. If any of you are interested in what it’s like to travel on a ship doing a translight jump, Captain Palla has plenty of room for you aboard the ship. Just mind that the journey will take about three hours, and also know that jumping translight is compatible with bionoids, so using your bionoid for the journey is an option. If you’re interested in making the journey, contact Secretary Yeri and let her know. She’ll make the necessary arrangements.” He looked up at Gau, who was chairing the session. “Permission to step down.”

Gau gave him a long look. “Granted,” he said. “It is the opinion of the chair that we end this council session. I think all of us have some reading to do, and I for one will be contacting the KMS about that trip on the *Tianne*,” he said calmly. “Is there objection to general acclimation?” When silence greeted him, he took hold of the gavel. “Then I call this meeting of the Confederate Council concluded. We will reconvene in two days.” He banged the gavel, and Jason stepped down from the witness box and started for the door as bionoids started to lower into their holding chambers under the floor. Dahnai jumped up from her seat in the front row and all but ran towards him, with Kreel and Krirara moving quickly from their places on the second row.

[And just how long have you had these drives, Jason?] Dahnai demanded. *[Months? Years? And you never told us! You never told me!]*

[I meant every word of what I said, Dahnai. The rest of you aren't ready for the drives. You're not ready for the responsibility they represent, and I will not violate my oaths by setting loose aggressive empires on the rest of the supercluster. You've said it yourself, Dahnai. The Faey cannot help but make war. They cannot help but be who they are. And who they are disqualifies them from having translight drives.]

[If you feel like this, why even tell us about them?] she demanded.

[Because I had no choice,] he answered as Kreel and Krirara reached him before he made it to the door.

Well, Jayce, you certainly shaved the whiskers, Kreel sent seriously. You drop that bomb on us, threaten all of us with eternal ruin, then invite us to take a ride on something out of science fiction all inside two minutes. I feel a little furburned.

I think he had good reason to be so blunt, Krirara sent soberly. He's right. The last thing I would want to see is some of the members of this council with those engines. They would set the entire supercluster on fire.

I'm glad someone understands, Jason sent with gratitude rippling through his thought. I tried not to come across as a dick, but threatening an endless war is one of those things where you kinda have to be a dick if you want to be taken seriously.

Of course I understand. What I don't understand is why you revealed them in the first place. That's not how you do things.

It was reveal them myself or have you learn about them from someone else, he answered.

Someone broke into your secure files?

No. It's the Consortium that knows about the drives, and the Kimdori spies in their territory discovered that they're trying to make contact with the Confederation. Their fucking clairvoyants found out about the drives when I sent ships to Andromeda to map the galaxy for future jumps. They started watching my ships and saw them execute translight jumps. That left me with little choice. It was reveal the drives or have the Consortium either do it for me or try to extort the house with that secret.

I see. I understand, Krirara nodded as they walked out into the hallway. You should have told the council that, Jason. It would have made them see things from your perspective a little better. I fear you didn't make a very good impression. You did come across as almost unbearably arrogant. If I didn't know you so well, I'd have been very offended by that speech.

I know, but I didn't have any choice about that either. If they didn't understand with full gravity just how fucking serious I am about protecting that secret, then it would tempt them to try. And I meant it. If I catch any of them trying, I'll fucking blast them back into the stone age, and the house will never let them off their planet again.

Yeah, you kinda made that clear already, Jayce, Kreel told him, trying to lighten the mood. So, how long have you had them?

We've had drives for a few months. We've been working on the project for two years, so there was a period where we had a few ships with prototype drives.

Done anything cool with them yet?

Not really, he answered as they walked down the hall, towards the landing pad. I wasn't kidding about us taking our time to be ready. We've visited one exogalactic planet outside of going to Andromeda a few months ago, but that's about it. And that wasn't even really a scientific mission, that was part of the testing of the drive. We've been too busy with the war to really do much else. Almost all of our resources and attention have been on the Syndicate.

Sooooo, think we could go on a much more cozy trip somewhere more cool than Prakka? Kreel wheedled.

Not today, but later, sure, he replied. I'm not going to keep the drives completely away from the Confederation. That's part of the written statement I released, it's a lot longer than what I said, and goes into my policy on the drives in much more detail. I won't give them to the others, but I'm not against reasonable requests for us to use them for the others. That's how I do things with the bridges and the Stargates and the bionoids, and the drives will be no different.

And that's something else you should have stressed in your speech, Jason. It would have gone far to defuse the negative reaction, Krirara

chided.

The speech was the stick. The missive is the carrot, he told her as they reached the doors to the landing pad. *Now, if you all will excuse me, I have some things I have to do. You can go back to my house and I'll be over as soon as I can, and we'll talk more about it.*

He left them at the pad and returned to his office, changed out of his robes, and ended up standing in front of his window with Chichi in his arms, stroking her sinfully soft black fur and looking out without really seeing anything. His mind was somewhere else.

It was done. They knew about the drives, and now there was nothing to be done but to wait and see what would happen. He couldn't shake this feeling that this wasn't going to end well. Either someone was going to ignore his warnings and try to steal the tech, or he was going to end up at odds with other members of the council over his policies. But those policies should not be a surprise to anyone. His stance when it came to Karinne technology had been consistent since the formation of the Confederation... since before that, since he'd kept things from Dahnai when the house was part of the Imperium.

But this was different. While the Karinnes had more powerful weapons and stronger armor and shields than everyone else, the drives represented a quantum shift in the balance of power in the Confederation. It made the Karinnes look drastically more advanced than the others instead of only being about twenty or so years ahead of them on the technology curve, and now more than ever, the temptation to try to steal Karinne technology would be almost irresistible.

Because of the biggest prize the Karinnes had ever put on the table, an engine that would give an empire intergalactic reach. And when paired with Stargate and bridge technology, it made the Karinnes look to the others as if they were on the precipice of basically spreading through the supercluster, getting all the best planets for themselves, then graciously allowing the others to fight over the crumbs after they'd already moved through a new area.

He didn't know what was going to happen. He didn't know if he'd done the right thing. But there was no turning back now. He had made a decision,

with plenty of debate and support from others, and they had carried it out.

Now there was nothing to do but wait to find out what consequences that action provoked.

Chapter 9

Raira, 33 Miraa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 6 March 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Raira, 33 Miraa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

KMS Tempest, orbiting Prakka 21-E, Andromeda

After the last three days, this was exactly what he needed.

Merged to his Titan from his office back on Karis, Jason finished the last of his centering exercises to fully settle into the merge, feeling less and less like he was controlling the mecha and more and more like he *was* the mecha, until it was impossible to tell where the body ended and the machine began. Four techs flitted around his massive mecha in their armor, performing a visual inspection of the unit before he disengaged his anchors and went to the weapons bay to gear up.

This was going to be a short and hopefully easy mission. Lorna had begun the next phase of the operation, and that was to needle the Syndicate by going after any assets that were hanging their asses out in the wind. Lone super-ships, small squadrons, lightly or undefended sensor posts or listening stations, the CCM was now starting to prosecute the war against the Syndicate...and it was all subterfuge. The last thing the CCM wanted was an all-out war with the Syndicate, so they were conducting these small skirmish operations to keep the Syndicate military and the Board off balance. They knew that the CCM's primary objective was the Dreamers, but Lorna couldn't just let the Syndicate sit there and think about nothing but protecting the Dreamers they had left. They had to keep their attention divided, and do it in a way that minimized the risk of the Oracles under their control foreseeing the mission and causing the Syndicate to catch them in a trap, and that was what this new phase of the overall plan was about.

The CCM was going after lightly defended military outposts or elements of the Syndicate's military that were easy targets, mainly to keep the Syndicate on their toes and distract them from the main issue at hand.

What they knew about the Oracles explained how the Consortium could win so many battles yet lose the war. The Oracles didn't foresee every fight, every battle, they only saw the important ones that would affect the progression of events, and the Syndicate had long fallen into the habit of effectively ignoring any battle that they didn't think would matter in the grand scheme. As a result, the Syndicate got their asses kicked in these smaller scale battles or battles that didn't matter, because they wouldn't devote assets to the battles and didn't care about the soldiers that were going to die. They might care about the cost of the equipment that was going to get blown up, but in a way, that was just part of the cost of doing business when one's business was profiting off war. A single ship or sensor outpost was a write-off on the balance sheet to the Syndicate, a stance that Jason had no doubt drove the Syndicate's military commanders absolutely crazy.

The key here, and why it would work, was the current conflict between the *Oracles*. Never before had the Oracles predicted *different* outcomes to the same question, so now the Syndicate didn't know if *any* battle was important or not. Because of that, the military commanders were reacting to each and every one of these skirmishes, and that was creating the indecision and confusion that Lorna wanted.

What had happened four days ago was a good explanation for why the Oracles disagreed, because four days ago, four of them were freed from the Syndicate. The four special ops teams all went in at the same time from four of the five operational Nexus stations—delinking Nexus One and Nexus Two for about three hours so they could be pulled for the mission—and all four successfully retrieved the Oracle alive. Three of the four managed to deal catastrophic damage to the super-ship by leaving behind an antimatter bomb, while the fourth bomb had failed to explode for some reason...and he was *glad* they hadn't used any biogenic circuitry in that bomb. His rule of using only Confederate standard tech in disposable equipment had saved their asses. It did leave behind moleculartronic circuitry for the Syndicate to study, a computer architecture far beyond theirs, and what was a bit more concerning, it left behind crew that knew that they had targeted and

extracted an Oracle. The Board would learn about it, and that meant that future missions to recover Oracles were going to be much, much harder. Because of that, Generations were starting to train to go on those missions, the ones with the highest scores in small unit tactics and exomech combat operations. A Generation on the team could take out the enemy infantry quickly and efficiently, which would no doubt be absolutely stacked around the Oracle chambers from now on. Jenn, Hamia, Daila, Seluna, and Kroil were getting ready, just in case they were needed.

Male or not, Jenn was turning out to be one of the best combat Generations they had. He came in second overall when all combat ratings and scores were averaged, coming in right behind Jason himself. Behind them, Vella was third, and she was *beyond* annoyed that two *boys* were beating her in combat scores.

Jason was rather proud of the fact that he was the *documented* most dangerous warrior among the Generations, proving that power could be countered by skill and training. Myleena, Jyslin, Jezzi, Saelle, Vella, Kaili, they were all stronger than him, but he could kick *all* their asses on a battlefield, because he was trained by the best and he had the skills those legendary instructors imparted to him. He absolutely blew everyone else off the list in small unit, infantry, and exomech combat scores, he was first in gestalt-merged operations due to the fact he was Cybi's Primary and had the most experience, and he came in second in fighter combat and third in battleship gestalt tactical operations, serving as the Primary on a battleship or larger class vessel. Hamia beat him out in fighter ops, which was no surprise given she was an Imperial Marine fighter pilot before coming to the house, and Kaili and Vella beat him out in ship-based Primary operations. He was the Grand Duke, and damn it all, he'd do whatever it took to protect his people.

But the members of the Board had more important things on their minds right now than mere Oracles. Just four hours ago, Jason had sent in the frigates to destroy each Board member's favorite possession, and Kraal would send him a report on their reaction when he could. The vid of it was exactly what he expected, each frigate striking from complete surprise and executing a pinpoint strike on the target, while minimizing collateral damage to the target's surroundings. They'd used Subrian spatial compression bombs for the strikes, which were small enough to fit in the

warhead case of an external plasma torpedo and dealt shockwave damage only in a small area, which had done the job. They used an aspect of the Torsion effect to deal severe damage in the initial explosion volume, but like all spatial anomalies, the destructive power of the effect diminished logarithmically from its point of origin. Using spatial compression bombs, they'd wiped out the target but left the buildings next to them still standing.

Subrians. They were so *fucking* creative and clever when it came to weaponry.

That was a very personal message from Jason to the members of the Board that if they pursued war with the Confederation, he would bring the war to *them*. He would make them hurt, he would make them feel the anguish of war far beyond numbers on a spreadsheet. He would take from them what they treasured most, their *things*, and lay ruination at their doorsteps. Literally.

Jason wasn't going to be going in with jumpers for this operation. The *Tempest* was going in purely as defense, part of a 24 ship task force of KMS, INS, Skaa Imperial Navy (The SIN), and Grimja vessels that would jump to W2AA-31, then attack and destroy a lone super-ship that was there. The fleet battleship *Kamiata* was the primary asset in this operation, paired with the tactical battleship *Prophet*, and Jason and the Storm Riders would be literally riding on the ships' hulls as part of their close support defense.

It would be a relatively fast mission, and a nice distraction from three days of dealing with the *fucking* council.

Right now, most of the members of the council were more or less pissed off at him, and more than a little bit concerned by how far and how fast the Karinnes were advancing compared to everyone else. Krirara had surmised just how his speech had been accepted by the council, and he hadn't done himself very many favors with how confrontational he decided to be. But the main concern many of them had, one he had considered himself after the speech, was how the drives made the House of Karinne appear. The drives were far, far beyond anything anyone else had, technology that was *centuries* ahead of everyone but the Ruu, and it made the Karinnes look *intimidating*.

Not that they weren't intimidating before, but now the gulf between the Karinnes and everyone else was much, much wider, because the Karinnes could do something no one else could, and they wouldn't share it with *anyone*.

But the paradox there was that while the rulers were put out with him at the moment, the empires they ruled most definitely were not. The scientists in other empires were almost fighting each other over the opportunity to get a slot on a KES scout ship on an exo-galactic mission, and Jerrim had reported to him that morning that there was a sudden spike in applications to join the house. The existence of the drives had been leaked to the press, and now the lay populace of the Confederation knew about them...and they were inciting people to apply. That seemed to mystify Jerrim a little bit, but not Jason. He could see the allure to it, to join a house that would soon be spread across multiple galaxies. The adventurers, the dreamers, the explorers, they saw the drives as the chance to achieve those dreams, to satisfy their wanderlust or their desire for adventure or their desire to settle on a planet far, far away, and that had caused the sudden spike in applications.

The Ruu...they certainly didn't waste any time. Observer A had sent him a missive more or less admitting that the Ruu had been working on a similar research project, mainly to mathematically solve the behavior of light in hyperspace and had requested Karinne assistance. A was fairly savvy in not asking for the direct answers, but to have the Karinne scientists check the work the Ruu had done so far and confirm or deny that they were going in the right direction. And that put Jason in a bit of a quandary. The Ruu were virtually the only empire in the galaxy that Jason would trust not to abuse something like a translight drive, because they were adamantly pacifistic and had similar policies to the Karinnes in how, when, and why they shared their technology with others. The Ruu saw war as an abomination that went against the Cause, and would only fight when directly attacked, and even then, they would only repel the assault with only as much force as required to protect their people and their property. They did not kill unless absolutely necessary, and they did not hold grudges. In many ways, Jason admired and respected the Ruu, and he never dismissed their requests for scientific assistance...even over *this*.

He was inclined to give the Ruu the help they wanted. Telling them if they were on the right track wasn't building the drive, though it did take a fairly big step in that direction.

At least his friends on the council weren't pissed at him. Kreel and Krirara were too close to him to get *too* mad over his speech, and both Dahnai and Enva had more or less blown it off. And his closer friends on the council also understood his intent and didn't take offense, those who had known him the longest and had dealt with this specific quirk in Karinne policy concerning their technology the most, like Sk'Vrae, Grayhawk, Magran, Assaba, Vizzie, Grran, and Shakizarr. Holikk seemed a bit annoyed, as did many of the governments in the Coalition, but he had complete support from the other neutral observers in the council. And a few of the observer rulers, like Mesaima and Brayrak Kruu, had tremendous influence over the council. With them advocating for him, he hoped that things would get smoothed over.

His written missive had done some of that work. It laid out his stance about the drives in a non-confrontational and very logical way, and what was more, it also explained how the empires could petition the Karinnes for use of the drives, helping them move things or tow ships, that was much more liberal than Jason's ultimatum about trying to steal the technology. His speech made it sound like the Karinnes wouldn't share the drives in any way, where the missive laid out quite a few scenarios where the Karinnes would be more than happy to act as chauffeurs for the other empires.

And the first step of that was the treaty offer that Jason had sent out just this morning. It was an expansion of the current treaty that allowed Confederation empires to use Karinne resources to explore and claim planets for colonization and expansion, but this new treaty was expanded to planets and territories outside the galaxy. Jason spelled out in that treaty that he would trust the empires to adhere to the treaty without him watching every single move they made, and the carrot he offered was placing a Stargate in the Magnum Dwarf Stellar Supercluster and opening the galactic formation to exploration by the entire Confederation.

He was willing to do that because the combined scouting of KES and Kimdori probes told them that there were no spacefaring races within the entire formation, so there was no chance that war would break out between

Confederation explorers and indigenous races. There *were* sentient races in the formation, however. So far, they'd found 31,412 sentient races in various stages of technological development, from stone age hunter-gatherers to a humanoid species that had reached the computer age, just years from their first space flight.

He released his anchors once the techs were done and walked around the reserve area and to the back of the bay, where the munitions locker was located. They already had his heavy pulse cannon on the rack and ready to load onto his shoulder pod mount, so all he had to do was step over to the load rack and turn around. Two techs guided the robotic arms that lowered the cannon into position on one side and a missile pod of Falcon missiles on the other, then the two pods anchored themselves and connected to the Titan's system. He tested the cannon before stepping out of the rack, pulling it into firing position, then he reseated it back into carry configuration and stepped over to the weapons locker. By now, each Storm Rider had not only his or her preference for weapons, but their personal weapons, and Jason's disruptor was sitting on the rack right where it was supposed to be. He'd used that particular disruptor for so long that he didn't like using another. Its external housing was scratched up, and each one was part of the history between him and that weapon. He slung the disruptor over and behind his back, then returned to his assigned bay and anchored the rig down.

[Twelve minutes to the Stargate and we jump as soon as we're through, so stop dawdling.] Tara called over company STG as she walked back to her bay spot after arming. *[And orders are in. A squad, B squad, you'll be on the hull of the Prophet. C and D squads, you'll be on the hull of the Kamiata. K1, R2, and R3 are assigned to A squad. R4, R5, and R6 are assigned to C squad. Individual deployment locations will be loaded to your nav, so look for it.]*

Jason checked his nav computer, and saw that Tara was right. His assigned location on the hull was highlighted on a diagram of the hull, and they were putting him near the bow on the port side, backing up a mecha bunker position used by Gladiators and Juggernauts. Titans were too big for those bunkers, but Titans had their own hard shields, so they didn't really need them. And being on the ship meant they'd be protected by the ship's shield and diffuser, so they didn't have to run that either unless the ship

switched to its shockwave system. If they did that, Jason would raise his diffuser as defense against the Torsion weapons used by enemy rigs.

[You ready for this Vila?] Jason communed directly to the Primary on the *Prophet*, who was the youngest of all the Generations qualified to act as a Primary. Vila was only 24 years old and was still in primary school, but she'd done all the training and passed all the tests to sit in a Primary's chair, and so here she was. This was her first combat mission, and in a way, this was a good mission on which for her to cut her teeth. Not that crazy, short, straightforward, and with no surprises.

She may not even be an adult by Karinne standards, but the fact that she was a Generation meant that those rules were bent, because they *needed* her. And her being here was mainly her own doing. She had hounded Jason for *takirs* to be allowed to run combat missions as a Primary after she passed the training and earned her combat rating. She wanted to be here, they needed her here, so she was here.

[A little nervous, Jayce, but I'm ready,] she answered honestly.

[Don't overthink things, Vila,] Maida assured her. She was the Primary on the *Kamiata*. *[You've done this hundreds of times, this is no different from training. I've seen your training vids, and I'm entirely comfortable with you leading me in. You've got this, kid.]*

[Thanks, Maida,] she answered gratefully.

Jason and Maida more or less bantered with Vila to keep her relaxed right up to when they jumped, passing through the Stargate to Atrovet and then jumping almost immediately after the task force was back in formation, and then they broke up the party to prepare. It was a 38-minute jump from Prakka to W2AA-31, which was on the edge of the "dead zone" of destroyed sectors that ran about right through the middle of Andromeda through the U and W sectors. Had the Syndicate not pushed the Consortium back into their own territory, W2AA-31 would have been destroyed as well by advancing Consortium forces. The system was one of the smaller military bases, not big or important enough for them to interdict, mainly a sensor post to monitor the dead zone and track inbound Consortium jumps so the Syndicate could scramble ships to the system they intended to attack. The outpost no longer really had any defense since the Consortium had

been pushed far back, to the point where the base really no longer served any real purpose, and the only reason the super-ship was there was because they were evacuating the base personnel and preparing to abandon the base.

Things looked to be right on schedule when they dropped into normal space at jump distance from the planet and super-ship, and the task force accelerated to flank to chase down the ship before it could escape. The task force shifted into attack formation with the *Prophet* and *Kamiata* edging into the lead, the other 22 ships arrayed to the sides in a wedge formation designed to protect the fleet battleship as much as possible, since it was the kill ship in the task force. The *Tempest* advanced into the front of the formation, coming in over the top of the fleet battleship, then matched course and speed. [*Reserves on the line!*] Tara barked over company STG. Jason released the anchors on his mecha and advanced up the center line, then assumed his usual place behind Tara. [*C squad, D squad, up!*] she called. On the deck below, the Titans prepared to exit the ship from the launch doors. [*Launch!*] Jason watched over telemetry as the 23 mecha dropped from the Whale and landed on the hull of the fleet battleship, then started to spread out to their assigned positions. Because the ship was moving at flank, they couldn't use glide drives, and using flight pods that close to the hull wasn't exactly what they were designed to do, so the Titans were hoofing it...and some of them had a long way to go. The Whale inched up to the tactical battleship, and when they crossed over the stern, Tara released the anchors on her Titan. [*A squad, B squad, up!*] she barked, turning towards the launch door as it opened. The light over the door flashed red, then turned green. [*Launch!*]

It almost felt as if they weren't moving, since they weren't accelerating or decelerating and thus had no difference of inertia, but the fact that they were moving at nearly 65% of the speed of light meant that they had different protocols. Their flight pods and glide drives couldn't go that fast, so they couldn't use them...one of the very few ways were differential engines had an advantage over translation engines. Since the ship's engines were faster than his flight pods, he couldn't use his flight pods if he was beyond their maximum speed rating. He couldn't even use them to adjust his vector. Since he was within the tactical battleship's artificial gravity field, he dropped to the hull. When he hit the hull of the tactical battleship, his mecha's IP armor system synced with the battleship so the mecha could

stand on the hull if the IP activated without interphasic bleed affecting the mecha, and then he was rumbling forward to his assigned position on the port bow, running across the smooth carapace hull in a steady, smooth gait that belied the grace and agility of the massive mecha. Tara split off from in front of him as she reached her position, and a moment later, he reached the bunker position, which was a hatch in the hull under which was a platform that would raise to let the mecha out onto the hull. That hatch opened a moment later, and two Juggernauts rose up on the elevator platform and stepped off, and then the hatch closed. The two mecha took up flanking positions to each side of Jason, who launched a single spinner and pulled his rail cannon over his shoulder and held it in a ready position. *[Spinner telemetry is on Local G,]* he told the two Juggernaut riggers over local hyperthreaded gravband, which only had a range of about 50 shakra.

[Got it. We got access,] one of them replied.

[Katrim? Katrim Redbow, is that you?]

[It's me, who is this?]

[Who do you think it is, dork?] Jason retorted. *[Or does the big ID marker "K1" on your HUD stream not mean anything to you?]*

He heard the Shio laugh. *[I didn't even notice! How did you pull this assignment?]*

[Tara thought we were getting too used to R&R,] he answered. *[I thought you moved to a Titan company.]*

[Not yet, I failed the rating course. Again,] he sighed morosely.

[Oh, act like failing only twice makes you pitiful,] the other rigger teased, a Faey woman he didn't know. Telemetry marked her as Technical Sergeant Dula Medarre. *[I'm on try number four.]*

[Which puts you more or less right in the average,] Jason told her supportively.

[ETA three minutes. All units get ready,] a comm officer on the *Prophet* called to the mecha. *[Diffusers on until the initial missile barrage is destroyed, main ship will be running shockwave generator until we come into range of enemy ship Torsion batteries.]*

[How do you know each other?] Dula asked.

[Me and KI went through Juggernaut vector-based combat training together,] the Shio answered. *[Back before he abandoned us for a Titan company.]*

[Titans are the future, Katrim. Get your rating or be left behind,] Jason teased.

[I'm trying,] he nearly whined.

[Everyone knock off the chatter and focus,] the Prophet's mecha company commander called sternly over STG. She was a hard-nosed Karinne Marine named Major Latiara Uverre, company commander of the 305th Marine Exomech Company, known as the War Birds. That was why the two Juggernauts flanking him had large *paiki* birds painted over the armored chestplates of their mecha, one on each side.

And Jason liked it. He wanted his mecha companies and fighter squadrons to establish their individuality, so having custom paint jobs and prominently displaying company or squadron mascots, unique artwork, or crests was encouraged. The tradition started with the KBB, Red Warriors, and the Ghost Squadron, and now virtually every mecha company and fighter squadron had a unique identifier on their mecha, be it a color, a crest or icon on the tailfin, or unique art like the twin *paiki* mascots of the War Birds.

The Storm Riders now had a custom crest on their mecha, and that was a reproduction of the Phoenix *jaingi* that adorned Jason's back. It was across the chest of his mecha, done in gold instead of white with a red eye, shifted down enough so the head was right over the cockpit doors rather than being on the neck the way it was on him. Tara had adopted it for the entire company with his permission to serve as her company's crest, a subtle boast that the Grand Duke Karinne was in her company, and Jason rather liked seeing it on the chests of his comrades. It connected him to them, and them to him, and they were all as proud to wear his *jaingi* as he was to see them wearing it.

It went beyond just the mecha. Tara and four other Storm Riders had a copy of Jason's own *jaingi* on their backs...just done the more traditional way, with a Parri using that paste to draw in the design and allow the

organisms in the paste to eat away the pigmentation in the skin to produce those ghostly white lines. And the rest of the company had appointments to get them, since Parri *jaingi* artists weren't exactly common, so usually one had to make an appointment and wait.

The *jaingi* on Tara's back was *fucking sexy*, he could admit. It looked way more sexy on a woman's back than on a man's back, because it followed the sensual curve of her back from the waist to the shoulders.

The ships slowed from flank as the planet and super-ship grew in the distance, until the oval ship—the smaller ships weren't always spheres—was clearly visible, about 12,000 kathra away. It was one of their smaller super-ships, the size of a very small moon or very large asteroid, maybe only about 600 kathra in diameter at its widest point. But it had *tons* of heavy plasma batteries, arrayed primarily around its equatorial circumference at its widest, which was actually a clever design. The ovoid shape meant that the ship could get firing angles on ships very close to it, the ship's own curvature didn't break line of sight nearly as much as if the ship were spherical, and made attacking from the top or bottom to be particularly dangerous...and that was why the ship was rotating to present its widest circumference to the task force, so it could bring to bear *all* of its heavy plasma batteries.

[Missile barrage incoming, everyone anchor down and shield up,] Tara warned. Jason deployed his melee shield and his hard shield, extending its coverage to cover the two Juggernauts standing beside him, then he knelt down and presented the melee shield towards the direction from which the missiles would come. Kneeling down both presented a smaller target to an enemy missile and also made him harder to move if they got caught in a blast wave. The two smaller mecha took physical cover behind him...and even with him kneeling, the two Juggernauts only came up to the lower chest of his Titan. The other ships in the task force assumed the straight-line formation behind the KMS and INS vessels, allowing the ships with shockwave generators to protect the formation. About a minute later, the missiles lashed in, and were summarily torn apart by the Torsion flux. Brilliant detonations lit up the sky as the warheads exploded well away from the ships, and Jason raised his melee shield to further cover his mecha just in case something managed to get through. After the explosions ceased, Jason heard what he was expecting. *[Enemy mecha launched. Fighters, ship*

defense mecha, prepare for incoming, deactivate diffusers.] The ship accelerated under them as the task force started to spread out behind them, as the *Prophet* brought the *Kamiata* in for the kill. The much smaller enemy super-ship meant that the fleet battleship didn't have to get nearly as close to it as it did the bigger ships. The *Kamiata* could fire on it from 720 kathra away and score a kill, and that put it well outside the range of the enemy's Torsion weapons.

But the Syndicate had learned that Torsion weapons did jack to the CCM. Ion and neutron cannons started to fire from the surface of the super-ship, which *did* have the range to hit them from 8,500 kathra away. The ship's shields bloomed into visibility as multiple ion and neutron streams struck them, energy weapons with extreme long range due to the fact that high-energy ions and neutrons didn't decay like many forms of weapons-level energy forms did. They just needed proper focusing systems to concentrate the ion or neutron beam so it didn't disperse or scatter over long range, and the Syndicate had that kind of technology. But, unfortunately for the Syndicate, Teryon shields were more than strong enough to stand up to ion and neutron weaponry, even with almost all of them concentrating on the *Prophet*. They were trying to knock out the *Prophet* so they could get at the real threat, the *Kamiata*, which the tactical battleship was actively protecting by acting as a shield.

That was the *Prophet's* role in the tactical battleship-fleet battleship tandem, and it was a role in which the tactical battleship excelled, because tactical battleships had defenses nearly as fearsome as its arsenal of weaponry. They were exceptionally tough ships.

[Enemy mecha ETA 40 seconds. Everyone tighten your bootstraps,] Major Uverre barked. Jason pulled his rail cannon from over his back once again, then pumped the slide to load it. The two Juggernauts with him did the same as he identified the closest targets on his telemetry. Those he would shoot at as they passed, because most of the enemy mecha would attack the *Kamiata*. He deployed his Hound drone as extra firepower, and the robotic quadrupedal unit's back-mounted rail cannon raised to firing position. Once he had his first target, he opened fire, and almost immediately afterward, the others did the same. The shields of the ship bloomed into visibility as the slugs passed through from the inside but didn't stop them—Teryon shields on something the size of a ship were

directional, allowing something to pass from the inside to the outside, where they couldn't add that feature on a shield generator small enough to fit into a Titan—and he saw his target burst into pieces a split second later, struck by a 52 *konn* slug made of iron and titanium—or about 50 kilogram or 112 pound—moving at relativistic speed.

The advancing mecha withered under a hail of fire from both the mecha and the ship, as the ship's AMS pods activated to shoot them down, and as Jason expected, virtually the entire swarm of mecha passed the *Prophet* by and tried to land on the *Kamiata*. The mecha found themselves bouncing off the ship's hard shields, however, which left them open to attack from the ship's AMS and defending mecha. They then found themselves in a nasty crossfire as the *Prophet's* defending mecha and stern-facing AMS guns opened up on them, taking fire from both the *Kamiata* and the *Prophet*. Jason and the other riggers kept pounding them with rail fire, until the ship accelerated suddenly, starting its attack run on the super-ship. He turned and used his weaponry on the incoming missiles fired by the super-ship, which suddenly began to veer off their vectors as Vila started to warp space. Massive streams of lethal plasma blasted up from the ship when they came in range, but the deadly streams of high-energy plasma were twisted either upwards or downwards as Vila warped space to bend them away, and making sure to send them away from the escorting ships. [*Juggernauts, bunker bunker bunker! Titans, anchor and shield!*] Major Uverre ordered as the rangefinder in his HUD showed him that the fleet battleship was almost in range. The two Juggernauts quickly withdrew to their bunker position, sliding down into the foxhole and descending as the hatch closed over them, and Jason activated his Teryon shield and his melee shield, then knelt down and presented the shield to the port side as the ship began to turn to starboard to clear the firing line for the *Kamiata*. He knew what was coming, and he also knew that being inside the shields of the *Prophet* was no guarantee of protection. He recalled his spinner as he had his Hound drone take cover behind him, then hunkered down behind his shield as he saw the gunport doors on the *Kamiata's* bow Teryon rail cannon open.

It was over in seconds. There was a blazing bar of incandescent light that flashed from the fleet battleship into the super-ship, then the super-ship simply dissolved into indescribably bright light, light that would have permanently blinded him had he been looking at it with the naked eye. The

flare filter in his optic system compensated as the super-ship went up like a miniature nova, pieces of its armored hull at the vanguard of the shockwave that roared towards them as the ships raced away. He scooted to face the stern and stayed behind his melee shield as the shockwave raced towards them, but the ship accelerated to match the shockwave's speed, which gave him a startlingly awesome view of the explosive shockwave just behind the *Kamiata* behind them, very nearly touching its stern. The ships then started to pull away, outrunning the shockwave, which began to lose its intensity as it expanded. The two ships rejoined the rest of the task force, falling into formation at the center of it, and they slowed enough to allow the shockwave to pass over them once they were far enough away for their shields to be able to handle the energy.

[Mission complete. Exo, bring up the Whale,] Tara called over company STG. *[Good job.]*

[Hold positions,] the *Kamiata's* comm officer called over command STG. *[Long range sensors picking up Syndicate ships dropping out of hyperspace at our planned jump point.]*

Jason decided to peek, using his status as the Grand Duke to get access to long range sensors. There was a formation of 13 ships, including two super-ships, that had just dropped into normal space, and their vector showed that they'd jumped in from W2B-89, a civilian Syndicate system about 207 seconds away in hyperspace. CCM command could possibly order them to attack a group that small, which was why they'd been ordered to hold.

Or it could be bait for a trap.

Whoever was calling the shots over at CCM HQ no doubt was thinking the same thing, because the orders came down quickly. *[The task force is disengaging,]* came the follow-up order. *[All mecha and fighters return and secure for jump.]* The task force turned nearly 90 degrees from their original heading and held a constant speed so the fighters and mecha could return to their landing bays. When the Whale took up a matching course and speed over the *Prophet*, Jason returned to the ship using his flight pods. They were going slow enough for him to use them. The *Tempest* was inverted in relation to the *Prophet*, so he flipped over halfway there and came in through the roof doors and landed on the deck. C and D squads had

already gone down to the lower deck, so there was no crowd of Titans on the upper deck. The other Storm Riders sorted themselves out as they returned to their bays, and Jason did the same, turning his back to the bay and stepping back into it, then engaging the anchors to lock his rig down. *[K1 secured,]* he informed the ground crew. *[Good job, Vila,]* he called over to her, his thought proud. *[Well done.]*

[Thanks, Jayce,] she replied, her thought both relieved and a bit excited.

[You did good, kid, just like I said you would,] Maida added. *[You can lead me in anytime.]*

[We're not out of the theatre yet, so don't start celebrating,] Jason warned. *[We can relax once we jump out.]*

That didn't take long. The Syndicate fleet didn't pursue when the task force accelerated to flank to get out to jump distance, which allowed the CCM task force to reach jump distance without resistance. They slowed to jump speed, hesitated just a moment, then they jumped out in unison, heading for a bridge gate set up just outside the galaxy beyond Atroviet that would get them back into Atroviet, and from there, they'd use the Stargate to get to Prakka. The bridge was set up just outside the interdiction effect out in flat space beyond the galactic rim, in a place that made it look to the Syndicate that all ships jumping for Atroviet were going there, were able to jump through interdiction. The bridge was hidden by Kimdori SCM and had a ship standing picket at all times that could grab the gate in a towing beam and jump out with it within 14 seconds.

[Now we can relax,] Maida declared. *[Looks like you're buying the wine tonight, Vila.]*

[I can't drink yet!]

[Then it sucks for you, buying something you can't have for everyone else,] Maida replied cheekily.

[Push off, Maida!] Vila retorted, which made Jason laugh back in his office.

He switched back to company STG. *[With your permission, skipper, I'm gonna delink. I got a ton of paperwork to go through and two briefings scheduled for this afternoon.]*

[The championship?] she asked.

[Yeah. You coming?] Jason had sent tickets to tomorrow's championship match to the other Storm Riders. One of their perks for putting up with him.

[Of course I am,] she answered. *[And permission granted.]*

[Thanks, skipper. See you tomorrow.]

Back in his office, Jason opened his eyes and swung his feet out of the merge pod before Rivlin could say anything, then climbed out. Then again, he was a bit distracted by Chichi, who had followed them into the bedroom and had the young doctor wrapped effectively around her little paw, accepting all the doting and attention he was giving her with smug impudence. The only guards with him today were Shen and Ryn, who were out in the complex somewhere. During peacetime, or at least times of minimum-security protocols, they didn't stay with him at all times. They didn't even come to work with him all the time, just periodically, and mainly to keep Jason on his toes. They didn't want him to get too used to the idea that they weren't around, Aya had this notion that it might make him even more disobedient than he already was.

But today was a busy day, because of the championship. Really, he shouldn't have even gone on that mission, but he took his commitment to the Storm Riders seriously, because it represented his commitment to the KMS and to the house, doing his part just like everyone else. Because the Paladins were the top seed, that meant that they got to host the championship game, and the fact that it was the championship game meant that a lot of Miaari's usual rules about visitors to Karis got suspended. The IBL in particular had been pretty jerky about it, adding people to the list almost at whim and giving Miaari's office no warning, to the point where people were on transports to Karis that the IBL had invited whom the Karinnes didn't know had invitations. Miaari had about 45,000 visitors on Karis to see the match, who had gotten their tickets from the IBL, Tigers, Yila, and House Trefani. The IBL could more or less invite whoever they wanted to a championship match, and IBL rules stated that the visiting Tigers had 30% of the tickets of a championship match to sell or give away, and the Karinnes couldn't really say anything about it. Miaari just had to increase security to keep an eye on them.

One main problem they had was that Karsa didn't have 45,000 hotel rooms, so visitors here for the match couldn't all stay in Karsa. The solution was a bit of a clever one in Miaari's case, in Jason's opinion, which gave the visitors plenty of room to stay and also made it easy for Miaari to keep an eye on them...all visitors were placed on *Sarga*. There were four finished cities on Sarga that were scheduled to be opened for settlement in just a few days, cities built to be tourist destinations for someone looking for a tropical beach vacation. The cities were completely up and running, had all the support infrastructure in place in the form of utilities, mass transit, and entrepreneurs and their employees who had moved in over a month ago and were ready to open their shops, clubs, and restaurants. So Miaari put all their visitors over there. They got to stay in pre-furnished houses and condo apartments meant for Karinne (mostly Shio) citizens, not just hotel rooms, and had all the amenities they'd find in any city on Karis since the cities were ready to be opened for settlement. They were paying for those lodgings, but they were paying the owners directly, not a hotel or hotel company, in the style of *Air B&B* that operated on Terra. Fine dining, shopping, clubs, tropical beaches, tons of vacation activities, the visitors would certainly enjoy themselves over there. And when they all left, Miaari's people would sweep the houses and condos to make sure no spy devices were left behind, and then the citizens who owned those homes would move in once the dwellings were cleared.

Jason had gone out there yesterday to tour Melia City with Jyslin, and he'd seen quite a few very happy visitors. The city was jumping, and they were spending a *lot* of money, which would really jump-start the local economy across the entire continent. And while he was there, he stopped by Sarsa and the CBIM facility to tour it before the core crystal was installed, which was scheduled to take place in nine days. And barely a month after that, if the schedules held, they'd install the last of the CBIMs on Hirga.

And the names were already chosen. Cybri if female, Cybran if male.

He went back to his desk and went through about twenty reports from Miaari's office about security and the visitors, then went through several personal messages from Jyslin. She was touching base with him over the last of the preparations for both match day and the after-party on Tir Tairngire, which would include Meya and Jenn's wedding.

Then he got into the missives. There were quite a few “strongly worded” messages from the other members of the Confederation, which were actually fairly watered down compared to what they could have been. The messages were more or less necessary for them to save face when being disrespected, but most of those rulers that had sent those missives had also signed the exploration and colonization treaties that Jason had sent out, so they couldn’t be *too* snarky. A couple of them were fairly severe, though...which he more or less ignored.

Jason’s view of the council, and his position within it, was slowly evolving. More and more, he was finding them to be...*tiring*. The Confederation at its core was a good idea, and a good thing, but he was starting to think that maybe it would work better if the rulers on the council replaced themselves with dedicated representatives that didn’t have galaxy-sized egos and treat the whole thing like some gigantic dick-measuring contest. Unfortunately, though, most of the rulers rather liked the council, because it gave them a chance to deal with what they saw as their equals in a forum where it was much easier to make deals and expand contacts and influence. Dahnai and Enva were the perfect examples of that. Dahnai had really expanded the Imperium’s trade deals and political power outside of Imperium territory thanks to the Confederation, and Enva had turned the Sha’i-ree from a local power to a true galactic power player with her cunning, guile, and smooth tongue.

If only the council were full of Kriraras and Assabas. True, Assaba was arrogant, but he was *all business* when it came to council. Jason has a ton of respect for him.

Actually, the simplest way to deal with that was simply stop attending council sessions unless it was an important one. That was more or less what he did now. Cyra attended nearly as many council sessions in his stead as he attended himself.

After he cleared out his inbox, he wasted a bit of time playing with Chichi before going to a scheduled appointment, and that was as the owner of the Paladins...well, really because Jyslin wanted him to be there. He and Jyslin attended a meeting with the IBL and Yila over tomorrow’s match, a more or less ceremonial meeting where the two team owners gave the IBL official notice that their rosters were set, and their teams were ready to play.

The IBL officials then toured the hosting stadium with both team owners, the stadium manager, the officiating crew for tomorrow's match, and the head of the groundskeepers in attendance to make sure the pitch was within regulations and the stadium was ready to host the biggest annual sporting event in the Imperium. The meeting was private, and always had been, so it wasn't really all that formal. Their meeting and tour was immediately followed by a walk-through of the stadium for the teams and coaching staffs, which by tradition the owners did not attend. Yila was her usual self, though she did throw a few barbs in their direction over tomorrow's match. That, Jason more or less expected, Yila was the kind to troll an opponent to get into their head and get them to make a mistake. And at that moment, Jason and Jyslin were very much her opponents, even if they were also her friends.

As much as Yila Trefani had friends.

After the meeting, they split up again. Jyslin returned to the training facility to rejoin Frinia to get the team ready for tomorrow, and Jason went to another meeting, this one a scheduled cabinet meeting...where virtually no business got done. The whole thing was just talk about tomorrow's match and excitement that they were all going to see it in person (except the Kizzik, anyway).

And after the cabinet meeting, Jason and the about all the strip kids that weren't infants took a ride over to Dahnai's summer palace. She'd been in residence for four days, and had the entire *Siann* on Karis with her, holding court here in the days leading up to the championship match. The *Siann* wasn't staying at the palace, however, they were staying in luxury accommodations in Karsa, by special arrangement with Jason. The *Siann* always attended a championship match, and Dahnai couldn't really keep them all at the summer palace. It wasn't *that* big, unless Grand Duchesses shared rooms or slept on rollaway beds in living rooms...and no way in hell would a Grand Duchess do anything like that. So, Jason was hosting them in hotels in Karsa, and Miaari was keeping an eye on them as they got the rare chance to explore the city and parts of Karis usually denied to them.

And what had almost become a fixture lately, both Kreel and Enva were at the summer palace when he arrived with the kids, with Krirara wrapping up some business with the Kirri Council back on Kirri'arr before coming

with her mate, Krarrik. Dahnai was hosting several rulers from the council, mainly those friendly with her that wouldn't mind coming to a sporting event, but the others had yet to arrive. Kreel had gotten to the point where he spent most of his leisure time on Karis, and Enva was more and more becoming a fixture in Jason, Kreel, and Dahnai's lives. When Enva wasn't hanging out with Dahnai, she was hanging out with Jason or Kreel. She honestly liked both of them, and Sha'i-ree were an intensely social species, much like the Grimja, who spent most of their time with friends within their social group. And she considered them part of her social group.

Jason had one more passenger with him today, and it was a fairly important one. Tiny little Mrar Rahl sat on Jason's shoulder and let him carry her out of the skimmer, so she didn't get under anyone's feet and wouldn't have to all but run to keep up with her longer-legged companions. This was the Pai's first visit to the summer palace, the first of many to come, because Mrar was here to start training Dahnai, Kellin, and Sirri in telekinesis, Dahnai and Sirri openly, Kellin in secret. Jason and Saelle had been doing it, but they decided that they could do with some truly expert instruction, and when it came to telekinesis, one got no more expert than a Pai Master.

It was going to be easy enough to explain why Mrar was here. Dahnai had decided to go public about her telekinetic ability, mainly because of Shya and Sirri. Both of them had documented ability that was public knowledge, mainly thanks to Sirri showing off a bit too much back in the palace and outing herself, and too many people on Karis knowing about Shya's telekinetic ability for it not to leak to the Imperium, so Dahnai was going to reveal her own ability. And in a way, it was a wise move. With the throne now being held by Generations, who were all telekinetic, she needed to establish here and now that the Merrane Imperial family had telekinesis running through their line, so their descendants didn't have to hide their ability.

There wasn't going to be cover stories of subterfuge when it came to Dahnai. She was going to announce publicly that she had telekinetic ability, and she'd kept it hidden, following the old Faey tradition of telekinetics not broadcasting their ability out of modesty and respect. But with both of her daughters' ability being public knowledge and the Pai entering the picture, she was revealing her ability so she could train with the Pai Masters to see

if they could develop her ability beyond its current limits. It would be very hard for her to hide those lessons, so she was revealing her ability so she could take those lessons without issue or complications.

It also provided cover for the one student that *would* be a secret, Kellin. Mrar had a very public reason to be here, and nobody would know just *who* she was teaching once the doors were closed.

Jason could agree with her decision to reveal it, and also her intent to develop it with a Pai instructor. Mrar was one of the best teachers Jason had ever had in *any* subject, and Dahnai would benefit greatly from her instruction. But to do it, they'd had to reveal the Imperial Family's little secret to her. She had to know Dahnai, Kellin, and Sirri were Generations in order to train them properly, due to their ability increasing when using a gestalt. And that was one of the main reasons Mrar was going to be their teacher, because Mrar could be trusted to keep that information to herself. Mrar already knew that Shya was a Generation, she had to know to teach her properly, so adding Dahnai's little secret to it wasn't all that much more for her to carry. That put Mrar in one of the most elite circles of secrecy on Karis.

"This is a beautiful place," Mrar noted in Pai.

"Yes it is," Jason agreed in Pai as they started towards the main house. "You're going to need to send to the Empress, Prince Consort, and Crown Princess, Mrar, at least today. They don't speak Pai and might have trouble with some of the pronunciations until they've had a chance to practice a little. Trying to speak Pai immediately after lifting the language would make them sound like a drunken toddler to you."

"That's alright," she assured him as Rann laughed. "It's for a good reason, and we're really not having a session today. I need to assess them before I can start teaching them."

"Just be warned, Dahnai's way more arrogant than most. She *is* an Empress," Jason warned.

"Hey! Don't bad-mouth Mom!" Shya barked in defense.

"I don't care who she is out in the world, Jason. When she's on my time, she's my student."

“And that’s why I love you so much, Mrar,” Jason told her as his kids giggled, which made Shya even more cross. *Dahnai, we’re here*, he sent across the island.

I’m on the pool deck, she answered.

[Mrar’s here to meet you,] he warned. *[And remember, she can hear commune. So don’t think she can’t hear you whining.]*

Mrar laughed from his shoulder.

[You’re getting off on a bad foot today, buster,] she retorted. *Welcome to the summer palace, Mrar*, she sent openly. *I’m looking forward to learning from you.*

Happy to be here, your Majesty, she answered, her thought powerful and lucid, betraying just how strong she was.

Learning? Kreel challenged.

I’m a telekinetic, Kreel. I just keep it secret as a security measure, so I could protect myself if I was attacked...or I used to. I want to expand my ability, and I’ve seen how much Mrar has helped Jason. That means I have to go public if I want to get some lessons. It would be very hard to explain why I’m spending so much time with a Pai otherwise.

Wow, seriously? You certainly keep that secret well.

An Empress likes to keep a few secrets. Keeps the Siann on their toes, Dahnai replied lightly.

Jason carried Mrar and led the kids out to the pool deck, where Kreel, Enva, Dahnai, and Kellin were. Enva and Kreel were in the pool, splashing each other like little kids, Kellin was reading from a handpanel as he sat at the table not far from the kitchen entrance, and Dahnai was in her favorite chair, playing with two of the newest members of Dahnai’s household, a female tabi kitten that she had named Miita and a female kitten named Jai. There was another tabi kitten sitting on the table where Kellin was, and that was a male kitten named Ku. There were five other tabis on the island, but they were service tabis partnered with Imperial Guards. Miita was owned by Dahnai, Ku belonged to Kellin, Jai belonged to Sirri, and the tabis would travel with their owners as a matter of security and policy. They were the

perfect pet for a paranoid ruler, both adorable and with the ability to sense a lurking assassin.

From what he'd heard, the tabis had already thrown the *Siann* for a loop, because they reacted to the underlying hostility that the Grand Duchesses had for Dahnai even when they were mouthing platitudes towards her. Very few of the Grand Duchesses would allow themselves to *like* Dahnai because she was the Empress, a woman they saw as their enemy, and their disdain for Dahnai made the tabi react. Because of that, Dahnai stopped bringing Miita to court after just two days, to maintain the illusion of comity within the *Siann* if nothing else...but she had the tabi with her during private meetings with Grand Duchesses.

The tabis had quickly showed Dahnai just who on the Highborn Council and within the *Siann* were her true friends. It was no surprise that Anya and Carissa had passed that test, but it was a bit of a surprise that *Yila* had also passed that test. Then again...maybe not. Yila had no aspirations for the throne, she was quite content to run her own little empire in the shadows, and Dahnai was only her enemy in so much as she represented the law and order Yila had to circumvent to do her business. And that was just that, *business*.

Miita, Jai, and Ku were all from different mothers, so Dahnai would allow them to breed and their kittens to breed with each other, and those kittens would be gifts to very important individuals. Maer also had his own tabi kitten, a male kitten from yet another litter that he had named Bann. Bann was much older than Miita and Ku, however, more of a juvenile than a kitten.

They hadn't had them long. They went to Prakka seven days ago to find a couple of tabi mothers willing to give up their kittens, and since Dahnai didn't want kittens from the same litter to prevent possible inbreeding, it had taken them nearly ten hours to find three kittens that the mothers were willing to give up and the three of them found attractive enough to want. Miita and Jai were completely white (the Imperial color), Ku had a white base coat and black spots on his back legs, rump, and tail, and Bann had pale bluish-gray fur with a black band over his eyes like a Terran raccoon, demonstrating how varied tabi fur color could be. Since tabis didn't rely on the color of their fur to hide to protect themselves, they hadn't evolved with

fur colors or patterns that blended with their environment. Tabi fur was nearly as varied as Faey hair color, and they had many different decorative variations, such as stripes, spots, and bands.

Jason set Mrar down once they got onto the stone deck, and she padded up the rest of the way and bowed to Dahnai as Kellin got up to come over to them, and the kids rushed towards Sirri and Maer, who were coming out of the main house carrying ice cream cones of all things. Maer's tabi was nowhere to be seen, probably in the kitchen begging treats from the cook. Tabis were relatively shameless about begging for treats, on top of being darn good at it. *There's no need to bow in informal circumstances, Mrar,* Dahnai corrected her with an earnest smile. *And please, call me Dahnai when we're in private. And I must say, Mrar, and please take no offense to this, but you are adorable.*

A Pai never minds it when others find her attractive, Dahnai, even if that someone is a hairless giant, she replied cheekily, which made Kreel burst out laughing.

I know, right? Don't they just look naked without fur? he agreed.

Watch it, buster, Dahnai threatened, shaking a fist in his direction. Enva decided to avenge Dahnai's honor by grabbing hold of the Grimja and dunking him. Dahnai slid her legs off her lounger and sat on it demurely, looking down at the Pai as Kellin moved to stand behind her chair, his hands coming to rest on her shoulders. *I'm looking forward to learning from a Pai master. I've seen some of the vidy of what your people can do, and I am beyond impressed. Sirri, come greet your new teacher,* she called, waving her hand towards Sirri.

I've met Mrar before, Mom, she was over at Shya's house when I was over there, she replied. *Mrar is super-cool. It's good to see you again, Mrar.*

You too, Sirri, Mrar answered. *But you may as well separate from the others, I'm here on business. I need to assess you and your mother so I know where to begin teaching you.*

Oh, okay. Can I finish this ice cream?

Of course.

Awesome! You want some?

I've never had it before. Sure, I'll try it, Mrar answered.

Bring a cone out for Mrar, Dahnai ordered of the cook.

I'll bring it as soon as I make it, your Majesty, came the answer. What flavor would you prefer, Lady Mrar?

Don't care. I'll try most anything twice, she answered.

Twice? Dahnai asked curiously.

The second time is to make sure the first try wasn't some kind of fluke, be it good or bad, she replied with a smile on her muzzle.

That's quite an intriguing world view, Mrar. I think you and me are going to have a few long talks, Kellin told her. You mind if I sit in on your session? I'm very curious to see a Pai Master at work.

Not at all, just don't interrupt me, she replied. Clever, Kellin, giving himself a reason to be in the room with his wife and Sirri that Kreel and Enva wouldn't find suspicious.

After Sirri and Mrar enjoyed their ice cream, the Imperial family retired into the house with the Pai to start their lessons, leaving Jason and the kids with Kreel and Enva, and then Krirara when she arrived very shortly after the lesson began. Jason and Krirara sat at the table while Kreel and Enva continued their epic watery duel, sharing the pool with Maer and several of the kids. Jason found himself babysitting Maer's kitten as the three just-weaned ones played with each other on Dahnai's lounge. *I'm not surprised to see these here,* Krirara mused as she petted Bann.

Enva started a trend, Jason agreed with amusement rippling through his thought.

It's a good one. I adore my tabis, she declared proudly from the bottom of the pool. Enva was a very good swimmer, and she could hold her breath for nearly three minutes.

When did she get them? Krirara asked.

About seven days ago, he answered. *Thinking of getting one?*

I have a vulpar living with me, Jason, she reminded him. *And he's quite a jealous little thing.*

The males usually are, Jason chuckled aloud in agreement, rubbing Bann's belly as he tried to gnaw on the tip of Krirara's claw. *You staying over tonight?*

She nodded. *Dahnai asked me to stay over here, and I think I will. No doubt Kreel is going to get too drunk tonight for me to get a good night's sleep.*

I will now, then I'll keep calling you to wake you up and ask you stupid questions, he retorted, hefting a laughing Kyri high over his head, then he turned and threw her a good eight shakra down the pool, showing off the deceptive strength possessed by all Grimja, which was even more surprising given the Grimja were technically a lower gravity species. She landed with a big splash and immediately went under, only to be quickly replaced by Sora. *What time does the game start?*

20:00 Imperial Standard Time, which is 11:36 Karsa time. So we'll have almost the whole day after the match is done.

Gives Jenn and Meya plenty of time for their wedding after the match, Krirara noted. Krarrik ambled out of the kitchen carrying a pair of ice cream cones, then sat down beside his mate and offered her one. "You should try this, my mate. It's really good. This *chocolate* flavor is quite intriguing."

"I don't think I've met a single person who doesn't like ice cream, no matter what species," Jason chuckled as Krirara took the cone he offered.

"I've had this before, at Jason's house," she told him, reverting to speech for his benefit. Krarrik wasn't a telepath. "But yes, it's quite good."

"Oh, this is Terran?" Krarrik asked. "I thought it was a Faey indulgence."

"They think it's theirs," he replied. "Just one of the many foods they stole from us and now pretend they invented. You staying for the match, Krarrik?"

He nodded. "Is Jyslin joining us for dinner?"

"No, she's at the training facility. She'll be there most of the night," he replied. "She doesn't want to miss anything. She's acting like she's going to be the one playing tomorrow," he added with a laugh. "And that kind of

devotion is why she's the one that owns the team, not me. I've got too much other stuff going on to be a good team owner. And besides, I like batchi, but I don't like it *that* much."

"That's heresy around Faey," Krirara mused with a slight smile.

"It's nearly blasphemy," he amended, which made her chuckle.

Mrar kept her new students in the main house for a good three hours, during which Jason and the others were joined by a slow but steady progression of both Grand Duchesses and galactic rulers. Dahnai had invited 12 rulers in addition to the three already here to stay at the summer palace and attend the match tomorrow, and some of them were obvious and some were not. Secretary Kim, Zaa, Ethikk, Grayhawk, Sk'Vrae, and Magran were fairly obvious due to their strong alliances to the Imperium and their personal relationships with Dahnai, and if anyone really knew both Assaba and Grizza, the two emperors of their respective Skaa empires, they'd also know both of them were fairly obvious. The Skaa as a race were actually big fans of many different sports, because they enjoyed the competition and the drama of the event, and both Assaba and Grizza found batchi to be interesting because he found Faey to be a very graceful species to watch when they engaged in athletic endeavors. What *was* interesting was that Prime Minister Vizzie wasn't attending, which was quite curious, since Vizzie was the one with the real power in the Republic. Grizza was Empress of the Skaa Republic, but she had virtually no real power. She was a figurehead, like the Queen of England, with very limited and strictly defined powers within the Republic government, but like the Queen of England, she was highly admired and respected by the citizens of the Republic. The Leader Hraga of the Zyagya also wasn't a huge surprise, given the Zyagya's near obsession with sports, though it was a surprise that he had accepted Dahnai's invitation to come to the match. Holikk as well wasn't a big surprise, given that the Subrians were working hard to expand their influence in the home sector and with the Imperium in particular. Nor was Shakizarr much of a surprise, he actually liked batchi as a sport and rarely turned down an invitation like this, because it gave him a chance to work Dahnai to increase the growing trade alliance between the Verutans and the Imperium. The Verutans were one of the Imperium's biggest trading partners now, and vice versa.

The surprises on that guest list were Overmaster Birn of the Birkons, using his Hall of Peace bionoid, High Minister Chidari Chann of the Jhri, Queen Sovial of the Jirunji, and the biggest surprise of all to Jason, Council Master Zervinis from the Strath-Zegra Alliance. He was a Zegra, and Zegra were a very standoffish people. They weren't unfriendly, Zervinis was actually quite a jovial and friendly fellow, they were just big believers in the old saying "you leave me alone, I'll leave you alone." The Council Master rarely attended any events outside of official council meetings because of his people's culture of not involving themselves in business that was not their own, and for him to come to a batchi game...that was saying something.

He certainly stood out in the room. The Zegra were *big*, Zervinis was seven shakra tall, which put him nearly eye to eye with a Jobodi, and they weren't willowy. Zervinis was as burly as Holikk, barrel-chested and with legs as thick as tree trunks. He was equine in origin, so he had hooves on his feet, two fingers and a thumb on his hands, a long-haired tail, and had a short-muzzled equine head set on a bipedal body. He was covered in very short, thick fur that was so fine that it looked like skin, with a tan base coat with a multitude of black stripes...or perhaps he had a black base coat with a multitude of tan stripes, it was hard to tell. It was easy to see that, because like many cultures, the Zegra didn't wear anything above the waist as a matter of custom, neither male nor female. The only garment worn by most Zegra was a kilt-like wrap with a wide belt with a large, decorative golden buckle that held the family crest of the Zegra's lineage, akin to the dyed bands on the end of a Beryan's tail. However, only Zegra from noble lineage wore the crest, much like how the nobles of the *Siann* and the nobles of Karinne wore the Karinne crest somewhere on their formal robes, uniforms, or armor. And despite obviously being evolved from a horse-like creature, the Zegra were not herbivores, they were omnivores. In all, the Zegra were one of the races of the Confederation that Jason rather liked, due to their friendliness, their kindness, and their long-standing custom of minding their own business.

Jason was sitting with Sovial and Shakizarr when Dahnai and her family came out, Kellin carrying Mrar on his shoulder much as Jason had, and they came over to Jason's table. Kellin set Mrar down on the tabletop. "How did it go, Mrar?"

“There’s a great deal of potential there for me to shape, Jason,” she answered.

“A Pai! I’m delighted to meet you, Mistress,” Sovial told the very small Mrar, smiling down at her. She was speaking Faey, which was more or less the custom of the council. The language of the host was the language used. On Terra and Karis, that meant Faey, given that Faey was the official “common” language of Terra.

“Most apologies. Faey good not,” Mrar told her.

“Pai can’t insert languages, so she hasn’t learned Faey yet, Sovial,” Jason elaborated. “She has to wait for her interface to translate. Queen Sovial said she’s delighted to meet you, Mrar,” he told her in Pai, even though she’d most likely already gotten the translation from her interface. “And if you speak Pai, they’ll understand you. Their interfaces can translate it.”

“It’s an honor to meet you as well, your Majesty,” Mrar said smoothly, giving a little bow. “It’s good to see that us felines have some representation out in the universe.”

Sovial laughed, as did Shakizarr. “Are you a member of Jason’s staff, Mistress?” Sovial asked.

“I’m his teacher, your Majesty.”

“Mrar is one of the Pai Masters, Sovial,” Jason nodded. “She’s a telekinesis instructor. I think you can understand why she’s on Karis.”

“Ahh, a wise move, Jason,” Sovial agreed with a nod.

“She’s not just Jason’s teacher now,” Dahnai said. “She’s mine and Sirri’s teacher as well.”

The others looked over at her.

“Yes, I’m a telekinetic,” she admitted. “I kept it secret on the advice of the Imperial Guard as a surprise weapon if I were ever attacked. But with the Pai here, I’ve decided to reveal it so I can get proper instruction. They feel I’ll be safer being Pai trained, even if it means that others know about it.”

“So Sirri and Shya inherited their ability from you,” Shakizarr noted.

“Exactly, Shakizarr,” she smiled.

“Her Majesty has some potential that I can work with to improve and expand her ability,” Mrar announced after getting the translation from her interface. “Princess Sirri, on the other paw, has considerable potential. Considerable,” she said respectfully. “She’ll be quite formidable once she’s properly trained.”

Sirri nearly beamed.

“A mother likes to hear that her daughter will surpass her,” Dahnai said lovingly, putting a hand on Sirri’s shoulder.

“What about Maer?” Shakizarr asked.

She sighed and shook her head. “Telekinesis can run through families among the Faey, but not *everyone* always inherits it,” she answered. “Maer has considerable power in talent but hasn’t shown any telekinetic ability. But his children very well may have it.”

“I’ll be the judge of that, your Majesty,” Mrar said brusquely. “The techniques the Faey use to detect and determine ability are rather crude, if you don’t mind me saying. And ability doesn’t always manifest at the same time talent does, so Faey often miss it because they test too early. Ability can manifest much, much later than talent. Years later. You should let me assess him.”

“That’s what happened with Jyslin, Yana, and Sheleese,” Jason mused. “They all had ability and didn’t know it, because they were tested as children, and it didn’t manifest until they were adults.”

“I’d be happy to have you do just that, Mrar,” Dahnai said brightly. *Maer! Come to the pool!*

Be right there, Mother, he answered. *We’re down at the beach.*

Mrar took Maer into the house after he got there, and Dahnai joined the table while they waited. They got into politics and business, so Jason more or less tuned them out and bantered with Kreel and Krirara privately, who were in the pool playing with the kids. But, in what Jason felt was a nearly shockingly short time, Mrar returned to the table with Maer carrying her, who set her down on the table. “Add Maer to the training schedule, your Majesty,” she declared simply.

“Really? Maer, that’s wonderful! Congratulations, baby!” Dahnai said, giving him a sudden, rough hug from her chair.

“Aww, thanks, Mom. I had no idea I had TK.”

“None of us did! How strong is it, Mrar?”

“Fairly,” she replied after getting the translation. “Just slightly above average for a Pai, but it’s completely unformed. He has a lot of work to do to gain control over it.”

“Well, that just made my whole year!” Dahnai bubbled. “Three of my babies have TK! I couldn’t be prouder as a mother!”

“And I’ll bet Miyai and Kaen also have ability,” Jason noted. “Raisha’s a Generation, so there’s no doubt there.”

“Trelle, I hope so! Nothing would make me happier!” Dahnai said earnestly, squeezing Maer’s waist. “Do you think I could arrange it so a Pai could go to Kallista to train Maer, Mrar? He’ll be living there after he gets married, and it would be best if he had his own teacher. He’d be doing a whole lot of traveling back and forth if he trains here with you, and he has school, duties, obligations. I don’t want him to waste what free time he has on a ship flying back and forth.”

“I’ll make a few inquiries, your Majesty,” Mrar promised. Clever Dahnai, she knew that Maer couldn’t really train with her and Sirri because it would expose their secret to him.

Jason pondered that as Dahnai continued to crow a bit over it, wandering over to the pool to join Kreel and the kids. It really shouldn’t be much of a surprise that Maer had telekinetic ability, because it was a hereditary trait, and Dahnai had some considerable ability before she became a Generation. As strong as she was, it was no surprise that she’d passed on her ability to her kids. And both Sirri and Shya had had telekinetic ability *before* they became Generations. Saelle had coaxed out Sirri’s ability, and Jason had coaxed out Shya’s. It turned out Maer did as well, it just didn’t manifest until he got much older, so they’d missed it when they tested him.

Really, the Faey did seem to miss a lot of ability in their people, because Mrar was right. They tested them too early, and if they found no ability,

they never retested them. Their system had missed Yana and Sheleese, and it had also missed Maer. Dahnai might do with bringing in Pai to help set up a comprehensive testing system that would catch those late bloomers and help them realize their full potential.

And it would behoove *him* to do the same, since there was a very large Faey population in the house. It might even be a smart thing to do to have the entire adult Faey population retested to see how many had slipped through the cracks, to see how many more undiscovered telekinetics there were in the house. He communed that idea to Cybi and put her on the case, gave her the task of coordinating with the Pai to create a new testing system, then retesting the *entire* population of the house whose species had a documented history of telekinetic ability, to see if those other races were also missing telekinetics.

It had nothing to do with developing telekinetics to use in the military. It had everything to do with Jason's belief that as the Grand Duke Karinne, it was his responsibility to help his people become the best they could be. And if a member of the house had telekinetic ability, it was Jason's duty to help them develop it if that was what they wanted, even if they never used it for anything but fetching stuff while sitting on the couch.

Either way, he was genuinely happy for Maer. It would make him feel much more *connected* to his family, since his sisters and mother were all telekinetic, and it showed that the young Prince had a great deal to offer the world, between his tremendous intelligence, considerable strength in talent combined with the kind of training the Imperial Guard could instill in someone, and now his telekinetic ability. The Dorannes were definitely getting the better of that bargain when it came to the arranged marriage, much as Jason had lucked out beyond measure when Shya joined the House of Karinne and came to live with Rann. Shya was probably one of the most formidable of the strip kids because of her wide array of natural abilities, and now that she was a Generation, all of them had been vastly amplified. Only powerhouses like Kyri and Siyara eclipsed Shya, but not even they could do everything that Shya could do.

Shya was truly, truly special, and he was both proud and grateful beyond measure that she was part of his family. She was the perfect match

for Rann, and her abilities and intelligence would help him be a far more formidable Grand Duke than Jason would ever be.

They stayed for a large, grand dinner that Dahnai threw for her guests, just not quite so formal since it was served out on the pool deck rather than in the dining room—seriously, Dahnai spent almost *all* her time out on the pool deck when she was at the summer palace—and it was attended by members of the *Siann* and galactic rulers either wearing swim suits or nothing at all. But after the dinner was over, Jason decided it was time to go home...with only Kreel tagging along. All the kids had been invited to stay over for a sleepover party by Sirri and Maer, so Jason returned to the house with just Kreel and Aya with him. But he had plenty to do, since Jyslin was busy over at the training facility, helping Ayama, Surin, and Seido with the twins, then spent a surprisingly quiet evening sitting on the couch with Kreel, Amber and Twilight in his lap and watching vidy as the two of them just relaxed and chatted.

But Kreel had to be Kreel, and he followed up on his threat by pretending to be drunk as he repeatedly called Krirara over the vidy, just to annoy her. Even just hanging out on the couch drinking ale, Kreel had to satisfy his genetic need to be amusingly obnoxious.

Daira, 34 Miraa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 7 March 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Daira, 34 Miraa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Karsa Sports Complex, Karsa, Karis

He'd never seen the KSC so absolutely crazy.

The place was packed, with nearly 14,000 beyond its usual maximum capacity as standing room only tickets, people standing along the back walls of the bleacher sections and along the ramps, even spilling out into the concourses, and everyone was beyond ready for the match to begin. There was a large contingent of fans on the far side of the field wearing Tamiri Tiger red, yellow, and purple, but the vast majority of the stadium

was a sea of blue, white, and gold, the colors of both the House of Karinne and the Karis Paladins. Jason himself was wearing an official Karis Paladins jersey as he sat in his seats down in the stadium, first row center line and right behind the Paladins bench. He had all the older strip kids with him and a few kids of friends and galactic rulers, taking up the entire first row, and with Imperial Guards standing on the aisle on each side. Jyslin was down on the sideline with Frinia, standing just beside the huddled up coaching staff as the players took up their stick and got ready for the pre-game ceremony, immediately after which the match would begin. As the owner, Jyslin had the right to be on the sideline, but she was smart enough not to think she was a coach. She was there to *be there* with her team, kissing cheeks and patting shoulders as she went down the line of players, doing her best to get them ready for the most important match many of them had ever played.

Just about the entire Imperium and House of Karinne had ground to a halt because of this, and it was something of an annual thing among the Faey. Shops were closed, people were packed into bars and patios and viewing parties in homes, parks, and large open areas, and there was barely a hovercar in the air in Karsa. The city was nearly a ghost town, because everyone was somewhere they could watch the match. The Championship Match was just about the biggest annual event in Faey society that wasn't New Year's Day, and was more or less a holiday because most businesses closed a couple of hours before the match so the employees could go home or to a viewing party to watch it. About the only things open right now were bars and convenience stores for people to make last-minute runs on things they needed to watch the match, and the city would partially open back up after the match was over so all those people had somewhere to go to either celebrate or commiserate. Parks, restaurants, and clubs would reopen after the match to cash in on the crowds, and it was something of a new tradition in Karsa for people to go to Crystal Beach to celebrate, started when the Karsa Bombers won the Karis Planetary League championship three years ago. If the Paladins won, virtually every beach in Karsa would be swarmed with celebrating fans, because Crystal Beach was nowhere near big enough to hold them all.

Even the environment was reacting to the excitement. All three of the giant oye trees in Karsa, the two that were at the CBIM facilities for Cybi

and Cyra and Jason's own tree, had all flowered over the last few days, which added the heavenly smell of *oye* flowers wafting through the entire city, with the promise of a shower of aromatic petals when the flowers matured. Cybi and Cyra's trees were only a little smaller than Jason's tree, and both of them flowered quite often. But neither had started to produce fruit, at least yet. But still, given how huge *oye* trees were, the two trees stood as tall as or taller than the buildings around them, and their canopies extended out over the shorter buildings around them. There were a few places where someone could stand on the roof of a skyscraper and nearly reach out and touch the tip of a golden leaf of an *oye* tree.

They were part of Karsa's skyline, and a beloved part of the city's very identity. Karsa would not be Karsa without the three *oye* trees that grew within its borders, two in the heart of downtown not far from each other, close enough for the edges of their canopies to intermesh, and Jason's tree in the northeast corner of the city, dominating the residential areas of that part of the city. The official seal of Karsa included Cybi's and Cyra's *oye* trees in its design.

The seating wasn't by importance, age, or relation to him. Jason had Kreel and Enva sitting on one side of him and Krirara, Krarrik, and their son Krairak on the other, who was home on holiday from school. To each side of them, they had Latoiya on one side and Ryla on the other, who was Myri's oldest and not Jason's biological daughter (though he considered her his as much as he considered Danelle his). Miaari's three cubs, Yemaari, Maaaleth, and Haan, were sitting on the other side of Ryla, and Grayhawk's younger son was sitting on the other side of Latoiya, who out of tradition was also named Grayhawk. All of Grayhawk's children, boy or girl, were officially named Grayhawk (no other name, just Grayhawk, which was a tradition of the High Prince's family that was outside the usual naming customs for Shio), though they all had nicknames. Grayhawk's son Grayhawk was known as Akro to most everyone, which was a Shio word for *swift*, and he'd come to Karis enough to know the strip kids by name and have some friendships among them. That was why he'd been invited. Kreel had brought his adolescent nephew Arvid to the match, who was sitting with Aran and Zachary, Aria was sitting with Rann and Shya further down the row, and on the other side of the row, Jason had another child of a guest, Anya's daughter Mari, who was sitting with Yuri and Sami, who

were her best friends on Karis. Yuri was her best friend *period*. Rook was sitting on the other side of Sami, in his newest bionoid body, giving it a test drive...but it still had the metallic skin he favored. The bionoids of the other biogenic computers were sitting past him, all the way out to the end of the row, where Shen and Dera stood guard. Mikano was sitting down the line from Jason, invited by Jyslin, who had threatened Jason with bloody murder if he didn't pull the *Javelin* off the board so she could attend in person. Jason had one more diplomatic guest down in the seats, and that was Enva's youngest daughter Medra, who was an absolute cutie...and also well developed in ways that teenage boys found very interesting despite only being 11 years old. But that was how Sha'i-ree matured, so it was entirely natural. They started puberty around nine and were considered fully sexually mature at 11, even though they weren't considered adults in their society until the age of 17. She was sitting down at the other end of the row from the CBIMs, sitting beside Zara, Min's oldest.

That put quite a bit of species diversity in Jason's seats, and in a way, reflected the House of Karinne as a whole. It wasn't just Faey, Terrans, and Shio packed into the stadium, the three races that made up the majority of the house population, it was a panoply of races and species spanning the entire galaxy. The hands being thrust into the air may have fur on them, or talons, or only three fingers, or maybe seven. They may be long and graceful, or ham-fisted and powerful. Those hands may be covered in scales, or webbed, or may not be a hand at all, but rather a tentacle or the thumbclaw of a wing or the tip of a chitinous or bony blade or spur. Jason saw so many different faces out there, all of them unified in their excitement for the home team, and it made him feel so much hope that they could all unite over something much more important than a batchi match.

But for now, he'd take this small victory.

Dahnai had an official role in the championship match, and she fulfilled it after the teams filed onto the field. Her job in the pregame was to carry the Empress' Crown out from the locker room area and set it on a pedestal sitting at the midfield center mark, which then rose up and hovered about 100 shakra over the pitch, to let the teams see the prize. She came out wearing a very special set of formal robes made just for this ceremony, done in the colors of the teams playing...and given that sometimes two teams had clashing colors, it was sometimes a challenge for the tailors to come up

with something that honored the tradition but also looked good. Luckily for them, though, the colors of the Tigers and the Paladins were complementary, so her formal robes were rather smashing. She certainly hammed it up, presenting it over her head to all four sides of the pitch, letting the fans see the antique, then she set it on the hovering platform, a glass dome rotated over it to protect it and keep it from sliding off, and then the small pedestal rose up over the pitch on its hoverpods, where it would stay until the presentation ceremony after the game. Her other role was to be present at the pre-match meeting between the officials, head coaches, and the captains of the two teams. After that, Dahnai withdrew to her ceremonial seat on a hovering platform behind the bench of the visiting team, which was a faithful replica of her throne in the palace. The platform would raise just high enough to look over the players on the sideline but not so high she blocked the view of the spectators in the stands behind her. In the interests of security, a hard shield briefly shimmered into visibility around her platform as it was activated and then returned to invisibility, once she was properly ensconced and the platform raised.

That was why Dahnai wasn't sitting with Jason or up in the skybox with her kids and other dignitaries. For this match, she had a special seat on the pitch itself, part of the 720-year-old traditions of the IBL. And she wouldn't spend the entire game on the Tigers sidelines. After the half, she'd move to the home team's side of the pitch.

The captains moved to each side of the field, and a thunder rolled through the stadium when the players took the pitch. It was so loud that Jason turned on the dampers in the earplugs he was wearing, reducing the roar to a non-painful level. He knew what it would be like sitting on the front row, he and all his kids and guests had come prepared for it.

Fortunately, they didn't need to shout to communicate. *It's even louder than you said it would be, Jayce,* Krirara complained as she hastily put in her Kirri-shaped earplugs.

I warned you, was all he sent in reply. *This is one of the loudest stadiums in pro-level sports, the shape of it just amplifies the roar of the crowd. Why do you think they sell earplugs on the concourse?* he added cheekily.

The head referee walked out to the center mark with the ball, and barely a minute later, the match officially began. And from the very first minute of the match, everyone knew that they were going to see one *hell* of a match, because there was one player from each team laying writhing on the pitch and the score was 1-0 Paladins just 48 seconds into the match. Both teams were making it clear that players were going to be leaving blood, teeth, and maybe even eyes and ears on the pitch when the match was over, which wasn't unusual for a championship match. This was usually the most physical and bloody match of the year.

And that level of brutal aggression from both teams did not ebb over the first two divisions. The clock didn't stop for injuries in batchi unless a coach used up her precious time-out or a player was laying dying on the field, so there were several girls out there on both teams playing with blood flowing down their arms, legs, or necks, refusing to go in for treatment to leave their team a woman down while they were tended. Just like Terran soccer, if a player left the pitch and was substituted, she couldn't come back into the match, and a team only had two substitutions per half that did not carry over if they were not used in the first half, so the players were playing through just about anything but a broken bone so they didn't get pulled and also didn't leave their team shorthanded while they got bandaged or wrapped. And while the play was aggressive and maybe a little violent, it was still absolutely enthralling, as the best system in IBL batchi came up against some of the highest-priced talent in the IBL, and it was a *spectacle*. There was an entire highlight reel worth of amazing plays just in the first half!

At halftime, it was 15-13 Paladins, and the stadium nearly emptied as everyone rushed to the bathroom or to buy concessions. There was no "half time show" in the championship match, they didn't deviate from IBL rules in any way for this game, and that included the length of halftime. There was entertainment, however, as those who didn't charge for the bathroom got to enjoy a flyover of ships from dozens of different empires from the CCM, letting them show off their ships for the entire Confederation. The flyover procession was led by a KMS frigate and a Sha'i-ree fast attack frigate, two of the fastest, sleekest ships in the CCM, and the ships just got bigger and bigger as they passed over. The procession was crowned by a flyover of the KMS *Kinai*, flying on a very specific vector that allowed the

ship to dip down into the atmosphere and get close enough to the ground for those below to truly appreciate its size without permanently disrupting the upper level jet stream of the planet's atmosphere or altering the orbit or orbital track of the planet, Kosigi, or any of the planet's orbiting artificial satellites.

There was a *reason* ships as big as the *Kinai* didn't come into a planet's atmosphere without a hell of a lot of preparation. The effect they could have on a planet's weather was just one of the hidden dangers they could pose. A ship big enough to create its own tides could have plenty of other detrimental effects on a planet's workings.

Dahani's hovering platform moved across the pitch just before the players took the field, and that put her barely a dozen shakra from where he was sitting. *I think I know who's getting the crown this year*, she noted privately to him.

Oh really?

Paladins will wrap this one up early in the fourth, she predicted. *The Paladin defense is confusing the hell out of the Tigers' playcaller. They're lucky they scored as many goals as they have*, she analyzed. *They scored those goals on the pure skill and athleticism of Braika Moralle, their center striker. The Paladins will shut her down in the second half, and that'll be it. I say Paladins by five goals, maybe 22-17.*

And every listener in the stadium will now believe the game is rigged, he teased, which made Shya burst out laughing down the row.

Hey, no rigging involved. That's my opinion as a fan of the game. Why are you bitching anyway, babes? I'm predicting that your team will win.

Because I don't want sixty years of you didn't win that crown fair and square to follow Jyslin around, he replied. *Just keep your analysis to yourself, love. If you wanna rub my face in your analytical skills, write it all down and show me after the match.*

She just had to laugh. *Fair enough*, she sent, turning in her seat and grinning at him.

Dahnai, however, proved to be quite an effective analyst. She said that the Paladin defense would shut Braika Moralle down, and that was exactly

what they did. The Tigers' center striker couldn't take one step inside the outer arc without having the best defender on the Paladins in her face, and the closer she got to the inner arc, the more she got double-teamed. And that incredible Paladins defense were masters of double-teaming strikers, rotating quickly and smoothly so the open woman wasn't open long enough to be able to do anything if they passed her the ball. The Paladins strangled the Tigers offense in the third division, but the Tigers had made some great halftime adjustments of their own to throttle the Paladins offense, turning the third division into a defensive struggle where only two goals were scored, one for each side.

Things got very, very interesting at the start of the fourth division, because desperation was starting to set in on both sides. Both sides started taking more chances, the Tigers trying to tie the game and the Paladins trying get a comfortable lead, and that turned the last 16 minutes of the match into a wild, exhausting near-melee, each offense crashing into the defensive walls of the other team and running up and down the pitch in a near-constant fast break counterattack, with a whole lot of fouls being called when tempers started to flare. Things got scary for the Paladins when the centerpiece of the Paladins offense, center midfielder Emala Kivalle, went down after being hit in the head with a batchi stick, knocking her out cold. The Paladins had to use their last substitution, and a rippling gasp went through the entire House of Karinne when the head coach didn't send out the usual reserve center midfielder, she sent out a member of the *practice squad* that had been moved to the active roster for the game, true rookie Hirika Gomanne. Even Jason couldn't figure out just what the hell head coach Jami Goramae was thinking sending out a *practice squad* rookie in a game like this. It was clearly the gutsiest call made by an IBL head coach in a hundred years.

Barely twenty seconds later, Jason saw why. The Paladins were awarded a penalty for the foul on Emala, which had to be played from the spot of the foul, and since Emala was substituted, her substitute had to play the penalty. And that willowy little rookie scored from *nearly all the way across the pitch*. She launched the ball 287 shakra in a gorgeous rainbow arc from the spot of the foul and dead-centered the top half of the goal, sailing it in right over the robo-blocker, which was placed in the center of the goal and could not move. The Tigers defenders could only watch helplessly as the ball

sailed in, because they were not allowed to use the robo-blocker on a penalty and the ball came in on too high of an arc for them to defend it themselves. It was just...*beautiful*.

Ho. Lee. Shit, Jason intoned reverently as a stunned silence rippled through the crowd, followed up by a thunderous explosion of cheers. What she'd just done was akin to a basketball player swishing a full court shot, or a golfer scoring a hole in one by dropping the ball directly into the cup. Tons of batchi players had the power to launch a batchi ball that far, but not with that kind of accuracy.

Fucking amen. I've never seen that kind of long-distance accuracy, Dahnai agreed. *And she was on the practice squad, so the Tigers never saw her coming. That shot just went right through their fucking hearts.*

Dahnai was right, that shot was the proverbial dagger. Hirika was no Emala, which was why she moved to left striker, the left striker moved to left midfielder, and sub-captain Trima Dokarre took over at center midfielder to lead the offense, but the damage had been done. Jami's strategy for the remaining five minutes of the match was to put the ball in Hirika's stick as much as possible and just fucking *dare* the Tigers to foul her, since they'd just seen that she could score from *anywhere on the pitch*. That broke the Tigers defense, that had been relying on fouling as liberally and as violently as possible, knocking Paladins players on their asses to break up offensive plays. The Paladins scored one more goal to go ahead by four, and the Paladins defense continued to shut out the Tigers, effectively running out the clock.

When the final gun sounded, the Paladins had defeated the Tamiri Tigers 20-16. Dahnai hadn't been right with her prediction, but she was pretty close.

Jason was honestly surprised the entire stadium didn't collapse. The place was shaking, he could feel the floor under his feet rocking up and down as the fans went absolutely nuts, screaming and jumping, feet stomping, tails slapping on the seats and floor, shrill cries and shrieks rising over the roar as some of the louder species showed off their vocal prowess. The heavy plasma ground batteries around the city began to fire into the air at their lowest power setting, causing relatively harmless, brilliant red and orange streams of plasma to streak up into the heavens. A flight of Wolf

fighters flew over the stadium fast enough to create a sonic boom, but that sonic boom was barely audible in the din.

The noise continued as the Paladins did their customary lap around the pitch, carrying Hirika on their shoulders—and rightfully so, that slender young woman had more or less won the match for them—and then it was time for the presentation of the crown. The team, coaches, and Jyslin and Frinia assembled at the center of the pitch with several IBL officials, and then the Empress Dahnai Merrane walked out onto the pitch. The team, coaches, and Jyslin watched with tears in their eyes as the pedestal lowered down to the turf, then the Empress stepped up to it. Dahnai took up the crown and turned, then raised it over her head. *I award the Empress' Crown to the Karis Paladins, winner of the Interstellar Batchi League's 4404-4405 season championship*, she sent with clarity and power. *Congratulations on your season and your victory, Paladins. Well played!* The telepathic members of the crowd erupted into applause as Dahnai stepped up, and as per tradition, set the crown on the head of the player the team selected to receive the honor...none other than Hirika Gomanne. The rookie was nearly fainting as she knelt down and let Dahnai place the crown on her head, and she had to be helped back to her feet by her teammates. She bowed to the Empress, as per tradition, took a few seconds to relish the moment and to let hovering camera pods take pictures and vidy of it, and then took the crown off her head and put it on the head of the team captain, Emala. And one by one, the team took turns wearing the crown for a few seconds, then the coaches, and then finally Jyslin herself as the team owner. She then took it off her head and placed it back on the cushion on the pedestal, and the pedestal's dome closed and it lifted up off the turf, ready to be taken to the first stop on its publicity tour around Karsa. While they had custody of it, Jyslin intended to keep the real crown in the house and put an exact replica of it on display in the trophy case in the training facility. The crown would ultimately be returned to the IBL at the end of the regular season so the next champion could have it awarded to them, and the replica crown that was on display would become their permanent trophy. The trophy crown would have the names of the players and coaches engraved on it and put back in the trophy case.

There was a reason why the real crown wasn't put on public display without heavy guard. There was a long-standing, somewhat nefarious and

infamous tradition of thieves trying to steal the Empress' Crown. Thieves had pulled it off 87 times over the centuries of the IBL, but each time except once when it was stolen, it was tracked down and recovered within a matter of takirs. The last such attempt was just nine years ago.

That one time the thief got away with it was something of a legend in the Imperium. In 4075, a professional master thief named Branivan Vokerre pulled off a daring and incredibly well-executed heist and stole the Empress' Crown the night after it was awarded to the then-Pentovis Demolishers. He could have escaped into history as the only thief that managed the feat without getting caught, but he did something completely unexpected. At the start of the next season, he mailed the crown *back* to the IBL with a note that told them that he only stole it for the challenge it represented, and he didn't want to see the end of the centuries-old tradition of which the crown was part. The Empress still had him tracked down and arrested, though, forcing him to stand before her in the throne room of the palace.

Where she immediately *married* him.

Empress Yovia Merrane had decided that any man that could pull off stealing the Empress' Crown and not get caught, then have the decency to *give it back* because he didn't want to see one of the oldest and most revered non-religious traditions in Faey culture ruined, was a man worth marrying. And according to legend, they lived a very happy and long life afterward, the pair falling in love after the marriage and having eight children...though none of them ascended the throne. Dahnai wasn't directly of that branch of the Merrane family, but there were descendants of Yovia and Branivan Merrane in the house.

At least if the legend was true.

The final bit of the ceremony was undertaken, and that was the raising of the banner. IBL championship teams got to hang a special banner in their home stadium to represent their achievement, like a pennant in baseball, and that banner was raised to hang from just under the windows of Jason and Jyslin's skybox on the east side of the stadium. Some of the guests they invited were visible at the window cheering as they looked down from the skybox, watching as the banner was raised into position by two women wearing chromed armor built to resemble the armor worn by the Paladins

mascot but with hoverpods in it to let them fly, and then the banner crossbar was annealed to the mounts. The stadium broke out into the Paladins fight song once the banner was in place, the two armor-clad women backing away and then giving the banner a salute, the rising and lowering notes of the melody shaking the stadium as it was sung louder than ever before.

And that was it. The IBL season was now officially over, and so were the after-game ceremonies...though the stadium probably wasn't going to empty out for three or four hours. The team was heading for the post-match press conference, and in about four hours, after they fulfilled all their IBL-mandated duties, they'd be heading for Tir Tairngire for the wedding and the after-party. But Jason wasn't going to wait around that long. He stood up and motioned for Aya to get the herd moving, initiating it with a sending that only reached his friends and guests, and sent so that non-telepaths would hear it. *Alright, everyone, let's get on the dropship and head to Tir Tairngire*, he ordered. *The team, their families, and Jys will be along after they get all the press stuff done. [Love, we're heading for the vacation house,]* he sent to Jyslin.

[We'll be there as soon as we can,] she answered, her thought elated and nearly scattered with joy and emotion.

[Give Frinia a big kiss for me,] he told her.

He looked across the stadium up to a skybox and reached out. *You okay up there, Yila? We're about to go.*

I'm...well, I'm a bit pissed, but not at you, she answered honestly. *I can't believe we lost like that, where the fuck were you hiding that rookie?*

Don't ask me, you know I have nothing to do with the team.

True. But I can't fault my girls. They played their asses off. I'm proud of them.

You have good reason to be, he agreed. *You going to hang around for the press stuff or come with us?*

I'll stay here and come with Jyslin, she answered. *I need to go down and talk to the girls, no doubt they're devastated right now. But I'm sending Dara with you guys. I'll have her go to your skybox.*

Have them take her to the landing pad, he countered. We're heading there right now.

Alright.

They met up with Dara at the landing pad, who looked far more animated and happy than her mother. Jason gave her a hug when he reached her. "That was an awesome match! Thank you for inviting us, Uncle Jason!"

"You're welcome, Dara. I'm sorry your team lost."

"We own *both* teams, Uncle Jason. We get a trophy no matter what," she told him simply.

He had to laugh. "That's true," he agreed. And it was, Yila would get a trophy crown as a minority stakeholder in the team...though it might nettle her every time she looked at it.

Dara rushed right over to Zachary, who took her hand and led her up the steps of the executive dropship, and the Imperial Guards politely herded the rest of them onto the large passenger transport for the trip up to the *Kinai*, which would take them to Tir Tairngire.

Some people were already there. When they landed on the pad, Jenn and Meya greeted them. They weren't in their wedding robes yet, since they weren't having the ceremony for a good five hours, and they'd been there for two days getting everything ready and enjoying a bit of a pre-wedding honeymoon. They were going to have their ceremony under the *oye* tree, so they'd decorated a nice trellis in front of which they'd stand while taking their vows and posts erected along the sides from which to hang decorations. They'd set out rugged yet beautiful outdoor cloth for carpets, buntings, and streamers, most of which were hanging from the branches of the tree.

I'm glad this won't be a funeral during a wedding, Jenn sent cheekily as he took Jason's hand, a very Terran handshake. *Or a wedding during a funeral.*

Jason had to chuckle aloud. *I know, I expect Jys to show up already drunk,* he replied, which made the two of them laugh as the kids boiled out of the dropship behind him. *That match was epic.*

It sure was, Meya agreed as she gave him a hug, then kissed him on the lips. Are they bringing the crown here?

No, they've already installed it in its case in the KSC, part of the publicity tour. They'll put it in like six different places in Karsa over the next ten days before Jyslin gets actual custody of it. So no, you don't get to wear it until next takir.

Meya laughed brightly. I will eventually, she sent with a grin. Where's Jys gonna keep it?

In the trophy case at the training facility, he replied.

Suuure she is, Jenn sent dryly

Jason laughed. Okay, okay, a replica of it will. The IBL will be sending us the replica in a few days, and we're supposed to make the switch once Jyslin has custody of the crown. The real one's gonna be in our house, under the eye of the Imperial Guard. Funny thing is, the replica will become the trophy once we give the crown back. The IBL will have it engraved and send it back to us.

I figured. Just about everyone knows that the crown that teams display isn't the real one, because of all the times people have tried to steal it.

Can't make it easy for them, Jason winked.

Even without most of the party guests being there, Jason certainly wasn't bored. He spent nearly two hours just exploring the recently built compound, looking into every room in the house, even going into the service areas and maintenance spaces where the infrastructure was located, taking in everything his new vacation house had to offer. And it was everything Red Horn promised. The house was absolutely huge, the size of a small hotel, built so it flowed with the curve of the hillside and with its most striking feature being the huge deck built out over the rocky shore and ocean in the small cove around which the house curled. After he explored the house, he inspected every building in the compound, from the visitor's house for the giant wolves—who weren't there right now, probably out hunting—to the mecha hangar on the far side of the meadow holding the exomechs and fighters that were part of the permanent garrison at the site. The house was guarded by a permanent detachment of Karinne Marines who lived in barracks beside the mecha hangar. And the centerpiece of the

complex was the *oye* tree growing at the top of the hill in the center of the meadow, which was now the size of a small Terran redwood tree and its canopy was already covering about the entire hill.

By the time Jyslin, the team, and their guests arrived, Jason had had time to wander away from the complex, visiting the nearest Dreamer village to the vacation house to see how they were doing and check up on the progress being made to move them to Tir Tairngire. He got back in plenty of time for the biggest part of the party, and that was Meya and Jenn's marriage. Their marriage was a curious deviation from the Faey need to brag and show off, because most commoner weddings were low-key, intimate affairs without the kind of pomp and circumstance—and drama—that a species like the Faey usually pursued. Jenn and Meya wore special formal robes for the occasion, but the ceremony itself was simple, earnest, brief, and quite moving. Much like Dahnai's wedding, clergy from all three gods of the Faey pantheon were there, since Meya was an Arissi, Jenn was a Demirite, and all weddings were overseen by a Templar of Trelle as part of their religious practices, but they weren't married by all three in separate phases of the ceremony. Trelle represented the concept of marriage, so no Faey wedding was considered valid unless blessed by a Templar. Templars didn't always attend the actual ceremony, the couple secured the Templar's blessing after the ceremony was completed, but Meya had arranged to have a Templar at the ceremony. In a wedding like this, the priestess and the prelate performed the ceremony using ancient customs where each clergy member performed certain roles in the ceremony, then the Templar gave the benediction to bless the union and formalize the marriage after the vows were exchanged.

In typical Faey fashion when it came to a woman chasing a man, the ceremony was brief and to the point. Barely fifteen minutes after they walked up to the arch, the ceremony was over and they were officially married, to the rousing cheers and applause of the 77 family and friends and 343 guests present, including some family from outside the House of Karinne, like Lorna, Jyslin's parents Rillin and Yari and brother and her brother's family, Ivin, Yerae, and their kids Makin and Shera. All of them were here in person, when the adults usually visited using bionoids Jason had had made for them. Jenn had opted for a very slim marriage bracer, barely more than a bracelet, made not out of a precious metal, but out of

compressed Neutronium...which was *far* more expensive than if it had been made of gold or platinum. And in a way, it exemplified Jenn's personality. Beautiful, elegant, sophisticated...and hard as diamond. Jenn was the ultimate example of a Faey man who utterly embraced the gender equality within the House of Karinne, challenging the roles of men in Faey society even as he embodied what most Faey men aspired to be; devastatingly handsome, rich, powerful, and respected.

After the ceremony, the party turned into a reception out on the main deck, and it went on for hours. The house staff was assisted by Seido, Ayama, Surin, and an outside catering company to feed the large number of people, and they even had live music supplied not by a band, but by Jason and the Imperial Guard, many of which were quite skilled musicians. And Jason didn't mind one bit sitting at a piano for a couple of hours and playing Terran jazz and Faey neo-fusion with Aya, Dera, Ryn, Suri, Shen, Mai, Uma, and Kaera. Jason's love of music was still just as deep as it was when he was a child, sitting at the piano with his beloved mother. One of the players had kept one of the game balls used in the championship match, and they passed it around the party like it was the Empress' Crown. And that small ball evoked some emotion, probably the most from Frinia, who sat by the door into the house and all but clutched it to her chest, a look of extreme joy on her face.

She had reason to be happy. It was the first championship for the Paladins, and her decades of hard work and even sacrifice in selling the team to Jason so he could back it with Karinne's credits had paid off. She got her championship. Her Paladins had finally won the Crown.

It was a good time. Jason barely realized that five hours had gone by until the sun started to set, finding himself taking a walk around the meadow with one of the giant wolves, who had come and joined the festivities when the noise attracted their attention. Others were out away from the main party, taking some quiet time, so he found himself stopping to talk to this person or that, some he knew, some he didn't. But not all of those meetings were random. He was sitting at the edge of the rocky cliff with Rillin, catching up with his father-in-law about his progress with the factory on Jerama, when Miaari hunted him down. She padded up to them and spared a moment to reach up and scratch the giant wolf under the chin. "Jason, Denmother needs to talk to you," she told him.

“Fine, where is she?”

“In your office upstairs,” she replied.

“Alright. Sorry, Rillin, gotta go. Sounds like work is calling,” he said.

“That’s alright, son. I think Vari should be about ready to go home by now,” he noted lightly. “She’s most likely either drunk or asleep...or both.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” he chuckled as he got up.

Jason’s office in the vacation house followed the same theme as the rest of the house, and that was that it was clearly designed for him to relax even as he did work. It was nearly twice the size of his office in the White House, and like all rooms facing the ocean, it was dominated by a wall of floor to ceiling windows in front of which his work desk was placed. All he had to do to enjoy the view was swing his chair around. The office was meant for work, but it had couches, chairs, a vidlink that projected out a gigantic hologram for watching movies and viddy, a wet bar, and an in-room play area for the toddlers and babies, so he could mind them if Jyslin was busy. The room was done in light, airy colors, whites and tans and soft yellows, but the Karinne crest was painted on the opposite wall from the windows in the house colors, which he would look up and see every time he sat at his desk. And on the wall to his right, his *jaingi* had been painted on the wall in a bright gold, with the script *Storm Riders* flowing in a banner across the bottom.

He was very fond of that little touch.

Zaa was standing by the desk, her back to him as he came in as she looked out the windows. She had her hands behind her back over her tail, which was swishing back and forth absently. “Denmother,” he called as he closed the door. “I take it I’m putting the room in secure mode?”

“Yes,” she answered, so he hit the buttons by the door to do so. The huge windows shimmered and darkened, a visible indication that they were now proof against eavesdropping. “We have erred, Jason. Badly,” she said in a stony voice.

“Uh oh,” he said as he walked the considerable distance towards her. “Where did we screw up?”

“Kraal has sent back word of the Board’s reaction to your attack,” she said. “Their response is that they are mustering their fleets and intend to send *everything* at us. They have ordered their military to begin preparations to send an invasion force to our galaxy, numbering at least a million ships. The Board voted unanimously to prosecute the war against the Confederation until they burn the entire Milky Way to ash. It seems that they were quite willing to tolerate the loss of ships and crew, were even willing to reserve action as we targeted the Dreamers, but the loss of what was *theirs* has enraged them beyond all measure. We struck at them personally, Jason, and they have taken that attack *personally*. Now they seek to use the full might of the government they control to answer that personal attack.”

“So, in other words, we just triggered the one thing we didn’t want to have happen,” he said grimly.

“Yes,” she replied in that same emotionless, stony voice. “But it is not a mistake you carry alone. I approved of your plan. So did Lorna and the command staff of the CCM. We believed, as you did, that the display would demonstrate to the Board that we would not be the same enemy as the Consortium and bring them to the negotiating table. It seems that we dreadfully underestimated a Benga’s attachment to their material possessions,” she said, looking over at him with a stoic expression. “And now the Board is preparing for an all-out war of total destruction as retribution for the sin of destroying what is theirs.”

Jason gave a long, forlorn sigh and stepped back, leaning against the corner of his desk. That was the *last* thing he expected to have happen. He never believed in a million years that blowing up *one* manor or building or piece of property would trigger a reaction like *this*. Yes, they went after the most prized one owned by each member of the Board, but they had hundreds, thousands of estates and manors and buildings. Some even owned their own personal *planets*. It seemed...irrational for them to react with such fury to this.

“I have arranged to speak to an expert so we might find some way to head this off before it gets completely out of control,” she said. “He should be arriving very soon.”

“Who?”

“One of the Benga working for us. The rigger, Gen Lun Ba Ru,” she answered. “Perhaps he can explain why we were so wrong and help us prevent making another mistake of this magnitude.”

“You’re bringing a Benga *here*?” he asked.

“He doesn’t have a jack, Jason, so he can’t use a bionoid. And I’m not about to discuss something like this over comm, not even encrypted biogenic comm. My children have inspected him, and he’s no threat. He may not be loyal to the Confederation, but he respects the way we’ve treated him, and he’s sincere in both his desire to avoid war and his belief that we share that objective. He believes that if the Benga engage in total war with the Confederation, that they will lose, and it will throw his people into ruin,” she said simply. “He sees helping us avoid war as saving his people from destruction. He has a nearly unnatural outlook for a Benga. He has their acquisitive nature and disregard for life, but he also has a soldier’s devotion to duty. And he sees it as his duty to protect his people from themselves, given they have no idea who we are and what we can do. Not like he does.”

“Well, alright, as long as he doesn’t cause any trouble,” he said, then he gave a wry sigh. “And this is something *else* the council is going to blame on me,” he realized. “My track record the last couple of takirs certainly hasn’t been all that good.”

“This wasn’t entirely your fault, cousin,” she told him. “Yes, it was your initial idea, but it was approved by the CCM. It was a *sanctioned* operation.”

“That won’t matter. It was my idea, so they’ll blame me. Especially since so many of them are currently pissed at me over the drives.”

“Then I’ll make sure to announce this matter to the council myself,” she said.

“No, I’m grown up enough to own a few nasty stares, Denmother,” he told her. “I’d rather them only be mad at one of us. When is the Benga going to arrive?”

“In a few minutes. He’s in a dropship and coming down to the surface.”

“I hope they blacked out the windows.”

“He’s been kept isolated, Jason,” she nodded. “We brought him on a Kimdori cruiser He has no idea where he is, and he will have no idea just what this planet is when he arrives. All he will see is your vacation house compound.”

“Wait, isn’t he a telepath?” he asked. “If so, we can’t bring him down here. There are unshielded minds here, Denmother, and some of them know what Tir Tairngire is. I don’t want *any* Benga knowing just what this planet is, and what it means, even if he has no idea where it is. If he ever goes back to the Syndicate, they might find some way to extract the location out of him.”

She gave him a long look, then nodded. “I’ll order them to hold on the ship, and we’ll go up there,” she agreed. She touched her memory band with a finger, her eyes absent.

“Alright. Let me get my armor on.” *Aya, I’m going out*, he called. *Have them put Zaa’s dropship on the pad, we’re going to be using it.*

Where are you going?

Up to a Kimdori ship in orbit. And no, you can’t come, he replied as the wall opened, and a suit of armor on a stand extended out of the cubby.

Alright. That’s safe enough, I suppose, she answered.

The ride up was not a pleasant one, as Jason mulled over Zaa’s bombshell, then his mind started the *what if* circular train of thought. He couldn’t see where they went wrong, because he still just couldn’t believe that the Board would react like that to something that he didn’t see anything more than a slap in their faces. It wasn’t like he’d rounded up their entire families and executed them one by one, then sent them the vid of it. Or maybe...that was where he made the mistake. For a Benga, maybe that favorite manor or prized home *was* their family. It was everything to them, it defined their wealth and success and their power, and Jason had struck directly at it. In a way, he threatened their very self-identity, showing them that what most defined them could be taken away, emasculating them. They reacted to him destroying a house the same way Jason would react if one of them slaughtered his infant daughter. If they touched a hair on Julia’s head, he would devote his entire being to watching them die slowly over a pit of coals, slowly roasted alive.

That was the mistake he made. He never considered the idea that to a Benga, what they owned mattered more to them than *anything*. A Benga's stuff must have the same significance to them that children had to most other species. Benga cared more about their things than they did their offspring.

Wonderful. Just wonderful. And now he was going to spend the next few takirs trying to find some way to fix this fucking mess...if he could. He might have just doomed the Confederation to all-out war with the Syndicate, a war that may rage for *decades* back and forth across both Andromeda and the Milky Way. That was a war they could win, but the cost...the *cost*. He shuddered just *thinking* about how much it was going to cost, in both lives and materials. But mainly in lives.

And he was responsible. It may have been approved by others, but it was *his* plan. All those lost lives were going to be on his shoulders. He would carry their deaths to his own grave, and they very well may haunt him for the rest of eternity.

God...this just wasn't his takir. Or month.

Or maybe even year.

Chapter 10

Daira, 34 Miraa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 7 March 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Daira, 34 Miraa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

KNS Belaar, orbiting SS2-14-2C (Tir Tairngire)

The landing bay of the cruiser *Belaar* was typical for a Kimdori warship. It was large, it was immaculately organized and impeccably clean, and it was very spartan. The Kimdori didn't usually employ fighters as part of their war strategy, and they didn't really need to given their use of stream weaponry, but there were four Wolf fighters sitting in the landing bay with six Kimdori dropships, two Juggernauts, two Gladiators, and ten infiltrator pods. Those vehicles barely filled up half the bay's available space, however, which left plenty of room for a large table to be placed between a Wolf fighter and a personnel dropship, where Jason could see the Benga rigger sitting, waiting patiently. He was wearing a uniform of sorts colored black with green vertical stripes along the sleeves. He looked quite relaxed sitting there with two Kimdori sitting to either side of him—using high chairs so they could reach the table—and Jason was a bit impressed by the Benga's appearance and bearing. He was actually quite a handsome man, at least by Terran standards, with his hair in a military buzz cut and a single small silver stud earring in his left ear.

This was Lieutenant Gen Lun Ba Ru of the Syndicate Marines, his gestalt supplied, commander of an exomech company known as the Raiders. He was one of only two survivors of his company, and one of the very few Benga riggers who survived the Battle of Atrovot. He was also probably the best rigger the Syndicate had, far more skilled than his compatriots in the rigger corps...he was their version of Colonel Kyva Karinne. The file on him that Miaari's office had said that while he was not

sympathetic to the Confederation, he was at least trustworthy in his desire to prevent war between the Syndicate and the Confederation. So long as he wasn't asked to betray his comrades in the Syndicate military, he could be trusted. And Jason could respect that point of view.

He exited the dropship with his armor on but his helmet off, held under his arm as he walked towards the table, with Zaa right behind him. When they reached the table, instead of climbing up into the high chairs—they offended his sensibilities for some reason—he used his grav engines to float himself up and onto the table, standing on it. That put his eyes just slightly above the Benga's. Zaa vaulted up, showing off her deceptive strength. "Lieutenant," he said calmly, speaking fluent Benga. "I'm the Grand Duke Jason Karinne. Did they tell you why you're here?"

"To speak to you," he replied in that customary deep voice. He then gave a salute, which caused Jason to return it respectfully. That made the Benga's eyes brighten a bit, and he took a much less disinterested posture.

"Was he briefed on our situation?" Zaa asked as she stepped up to stand beside Jason.

"Not as yet, my Denmother," one of the flanking Kimdori replied.

"Then I'll do it," she declared, stepping past Jason, getting within reach of the Benga's arms. "We have made a grave error in our efforts to convince the Board to negotiate with us, Lieutenant, and seek your counsel on how we correct our error and prevent a complete war between our two galaxies."

"That doesn't sound very encouraging," the Benga grunted. "Explain what happened, your Excellency."

The Denmother was very direct in her explanation of the plan to attack the personal assets of the Board to push them to the negotiating table, and Gen frowned more and more as he listened to her. "We were completely unprepared for their response, Lieutenant," she finished. "We believed that it would convince them to bargain with us in good faith, knowing that we could attack their personal assets directly."

"That was the worst thing you could have done," he said bluntly. "With all due respect."

“There is no need for formality, Lieutenant. You are here to advise us,” she told him.

“My honest assessment, then, is that you completely fucked this up.”

“That’s our own assessment,” Jason said with a nod. “Now the big question is, how do we fix it?”

“You don’t,” he answered. “You violated the most sacred rule with the Board, and they won’t ever let it go. You went *beyond* business. There’s a line Benga won’t cross, no matter how intense a rivalry or grudge, and that’s that you never, ever, go after another Benga’s home. You can kill his family, you can attack his business, you can poison his customers, but you *never* burn down his house. The house is the one place of complete sanctuary that no Benga will threaten.”

“That is not encouraging,” Zaa frowned, propping one arm on the other and tapping her muzzle with a clawed finger.

“Yeah, but these guys have like a thousand houses,” Jason grunted.

“That doesn’t make a difference,” Gen told him.

“Well...fuck,” Jason sighed, tossing his helmet aside, where it clattered across the table, then dropped to the floor. “So there won’t be any negotiating with the Board after this.”

“No,” he said firmly. “Or more to the point, with *this* Board. You made this personal, and now the only way you can prevent them from retaliating is to kill them. All of them. Their replacements didn’t have *their* houses blown up, so they’ll have a much less vengeful point of view. And their replacements will most likely be amenable, since you saved them the trouble of taking out the CEO so they could take his place. You might be able to negotiate a formal peace treaty with a new Board, who will be much more interested in consolidating their power than prosecuting a war with you. Their stance may change once they have full control of their corps, but it will at least buy you a few orbits.”

“Wait, wait, you’re suggesting that we kill off the Board? The *entire* Board?”

“It’s the only way you’re going to avoid a complete war,” he replied firmly, emphasizing his position with a nod.

“Isn’t that kinda against your code?”

“My code is to the soldiers under my command, the Syndicate Navy, and my people as a whole. If the Board is threatening the survival of my people, then they have to go,” he said simply. “And it wouldn’t be the first time the entire Board was assassinated. That happened just 83 orbits ago, after the Consortium was pushed back beyond the Draygott Line. Some of the current Board were in on the plot to kill off their predecessors.”

Jason and Zaa traded guarded looks. “Gen, how do you think those second chairs in the Syndicate megacorps would react if we approached them before we carry out the attack? Negotiate with them to make sure we have an agreement before we carry it out?”

“That could be dangerous. The Board members don’t sit in their chairs because they’re not very aware of what’s going on under them,” Gen said after a moment. “That’s one reason why I never went into business, and I’ve never let them promote me up into command. I don’t have to worry about turning my back to my warmech pilots, where I would my corporate underlings or my junior command officers. The fastest way to get a promotion in the Navy is to remove the person holding the rank you want. That’s why I’m a Marine.”

“I can understand why you stayed in the warmech corps,” Jason told him. “At least your men are loyal.”

“You don’t put a dagger in the back of the soldier that may save your life tomorrow,” he said with a simple nod.

“Alright, so we shouldn’t try to negotiate, we should just do it,” Jason surmised. “It should be easy enough to kill all 153 of them in a simultaneous attack, but we can’t go overboard. We need the Board to reform quickly after we strike so we can negotiate with them, mainly so they can quickly countermand the orders of the old Board and stop the mobilization of their Navy. If we put all the megacorps in chaos, we’ll be getting in our own way. We can’t let them launch for the Milky Way, we’d be forced to destroy the fleet, and that’s a war I want to avoid in any way possible. I doubt they’d listen any more than Sha Ra did.”

“Cunning, cousin,” Zaa said with an approving nod.

“You have a strong grasp on how my people work,” Gen said calmly.

“Thank her, not me,” he said, pointing at Zaa. “Denmother, we need to get eyes on not just the members of the Board, but also their lieutenants. No doubt each megacorp’s gonna have a bit of a row as the members of their boards fight over the big chair we vacated for them. And we might have to help certain candidates along, mainly the ones most likely to negotiate.”

She nodded in approval. “We’ll have to move carefully, and with the understanding that when we strike, we will not get a second chance,” she added. “They’ll know that we have penetration into their corporate structure.”

“True enough,” he agreed.

“In the meantime, while we’re getting that set up, I think it would be best for us to keep pressing the Board’s buttons,” he speculated, rubbing his chin with his gauntleted hand. “I’ll have my frigates keep blowing up their houses, make them so furious that they start getting sloppy. That way they may not see what’s coming.”

“It will certainly enrage them,” Gen said in a warning tone, “but it also sets a very dangerous precedent for their successors. They’ll see where you will go and may continue the war preparations just to protect their own.”

“True. Okay, bad idea,” he nodded towards the Benga. “I’m trying to stop this war before it escalates out of control, not just change ownership of it. In that case, it might be a good idea to suspend the military action against Naval targets as well. We don’t want their admiralty so pissed at us they try to convince the new Board to continue the war. We made our point, we should pull back and let them chew on it for a while.”

“We’d need Lorna’s input for that,” Zaa urged. “And she should be here. You should bring her here.”

“True enough,” he nodded. “You have a beacon on board?”

“Yes. You contact her and have her report to a Nexus station.”

“Actually, she could just merge to a bionoid. You have any on board?”

“No, cousin. This is too sensitive for a bionoid,” she warned. “Have her come in person.”

“Who is this Lorna?” Gen asked.

“General Lorna Shaddale, a member of the command staff for the Confederation Combined Military,” Jason answered. “We’re starting to infringe on her territory here, so we should include her in our debate. If we do this, we’ll need to coordinate our effort with the Confederation Combined Navy, and she can issue orders to it.”

Gen gave them a look, then nodded.

Jason reached through the ship’s local network and accessed the biogenic comm node on Prakka, then used that to bounce his message all the way back to Terra. *[Lorna.]*

[Yes, nephew?]

[Armor up and report to Nexus Five. They should have a bridge linked back to me by the time you get there.]

[And why am I doing that?]

[Because you need to be here,] he answered. [Trust me. I’ll explain when you get here, but I’m not discussing it over intergalactic comm.]

She was quiet a moment. *[Alright. I should be there in about half an hour.]*

Lorna was just one of three they called in. They continued to hash out the basics of Gen’s proposal as they waited for Lorna, Miaari, and Kraal to arrive, coming in by beacon or by the Karis Stargate in Miaari’s case. Lorna was the last to arrive, coming into the bay from where they had the beacon set—they didn’t want Gen to see the beacon—and giving them quite a speculative look as she advanced towards the table. “Aunt Lorna, may I introduce Lieutenant Gen Lun Ba Ru, a consultant,” he said in Faey, motioning towards the rigger. “He is an honorable soldier, and you should listen to him.”

“Lieutenant,” she said in Faey with a nod, then she returned his salute when he stood and gave it.

“General,” he replied in Benga as he sat back down. “I understand your language but excuse me if I speak Benga. I have trouble with the pronunciations of your language.”

“That’s fine, I’ll be speaking Faey for the same reason. The Grand Duke can iron out any mistranslations either of us commit,” she answered as she reached the table, then floated up to the top to join Jason and the three Kimdori. “Now what’s going on?”

“We’re formulating a plan to effectively end the war, General,” Zaa told her. “And we need your input. We’ll need the cooperation of the CCM to execute the plan.”

“Alright. Explain it to me in as much detail as you can.”

They let Zaa explain the framework of their idea to kill off the entire Board and then negotiate with their successors, including having the Kimdori help along potential successors that would be most likely to accept a peace treaty. “Where you come into this is over our current military strategy,” Zaa told her. “Jason feels that we need to pull back from our current offensive against the Syndicate Navy to prevent inciting the command staff into trying to talk the Board into pressing the war.”

“That’s a possibility, but you should understand that how military people think is much different than how politicians think,” she said thoughtfully, crossing her arms before her breastplate as she thought. “What say you, Lieutenant? From the perspective of a line soldier, how would you react if the CCM pulled back?”

“A soldier on the front line is always happy to be pulled off combat duty,” he replied. “We may be paid to fight, but the best paycheck is the one that comes without putting your head in a firing lane.”

“Yeah, I agree with that,” Jason said. “But when it comes to the Syndicate command staff, I think we’ve proved our point. I think we should pull back and let them mull it over.”

“We could...but it might warn them that we’re planning something. They’d see it as unusual that we’d suddenly pull back when we’ve made some real gains against the Syndicate. We need a *reason* to pull back that they’d accept, that wouldn’t make them start reading into our actions. We would...need an offensive,” she mused, tapping her chin. “An offensive against a high priority military target. And the most obvious one is the system where they’re holding the last of the Dreamers, V3ÄE-31. They already know we’re after them, so it wouldn’t look out of place if we

mounted an offensive to take the system. That would also explain to them why we've pulled back all our other operations, to amass our forces for the mission. And also why we've done what we've done, to weaken any response they may undertake after we attack. They know we only have a relatively small fleet in Andromeda, and that we'd need virtually all of it to take the system. It would keep the command staff's attention firmly fixed where we want it, and besides, it would complete our primary mission. We could retreat back to Prakka with the liberated Dreamers and then negotiate. It would make sense to their military and it would fit in with what they think we're here to do."

"The Dreamers...the little brown-skinned humanoids on Atrovet? Are they that important?" Gen asked.

"I can't answer that, Lieutenant," Lorna replied. "That's classified."

"I understand, General," he said in a reasonable tone. "I wouldn't entirely trust you if our positions were reversed. I *am* the enemy."

"Hopefully not for much longer, Lieutenant," Jason told him. "Kraal, how many have your people pulled off the planet there?"

"Nearly two thousand," he replied. "There are 11,392 remaining. And we can evacuate the rest of them in the confusion when you attack. The Syndicate will be too busy looking up to keep an eye on the Dreamers. We can use the attack as a diversion. And I think I know how we can do it."

"Which is?"

"Tunnels," he said. "We can get some Makati onto the surface and have them dig tunnels up into the camp in multiple locations. Then we evacuate the remaining Dreamers in the confusion of the attack and hold them in shielded underground galleries while they wait for their chance to use the bridge. Given how fast Makati can dig, they could have the tunnels ready in a matter of days."

"That has some potential," Miaari agreed. "That way we don't risk the Syndicate executing the Dreamers when we establish a foothold on the planet."

"It does sound good, but it leaves open the issue with the Oracles," Jason fretted.

“We can negotiate that point.”

“No, they’d never give them up. Ever,” he said.

“The Oracle systems? Why would you be so concerned over those?” Gen asked. “You have much more powerful computers that probably make far more accurate predictions.”

“Let’s just say that the Oracle systems aren’t what you think they are, Lieutenant, and the Board will *never* willingly give them up. And so long as they have them, they won’t honor any peace treaty they sign. We’d have to take the rest of them before we attempt to negotiate. Mee, could we do it? Could we hit them all inside a takir?”

“We haven’t even gotten an accurate count of them yet, Jason,” she replied. “Remember that the Oracle systems are the most heavily guarded secret in the Syndicate. Give us a few days to find them, then we can determine how quickly we can recover them.”

“Well, if they’re going to muster their fleets, then they’ll be bringing the Oracles out into the open,” Kraal surmised. “They’ll be sending ships carrying Oracle systems to our galaxy, much as they did with Sha Ra. We can use the organization of the fleets to find the ships carrying Oracles. And besides, cousin, they don’t have nearly as many of them as you think they do. I think there may not be more than one hundred in the entire fleet. Remember, only one ship in the fleet of thirty thousand that attacked our galaxy carried an Oracle system.”

“That’s a point,” Jason nodded. “It’s going to hinge on how the Oracles predict the offensive. We have the system interdicted so they can’t reinforce it, but they have a very large force there, and it grows by the day as they complete the ships on their docks and man them. It won’t be easy. Besides, the attack won’t be anything more than a diversion. We have to make sure the Oracles see the attack, but don’t see *through* it. If we do it wrong, the Syndicate will exterminate the Dreamers on the planet, and the Board members will know we’re after them. They’ll go to ground, and that’ll make them much harder to kill.”

“Does the small number of the little brown-skinned people there warrant an assault to recover them?” Gen asked.

“Yes. Those are *my* people, Lieutenant Ba Ru,” he answered, looking over at him. “They were abducted from our galaxy hundreds of orbits ago, and we only recently discovered they were here. And we *will* take them back. I have a duty to them the same as you have a duty to the men under your command, and in the House of Karinne, we don’t abandon our own. It’s my most important duty as the Grand Duke to get them out of there alive and bring them home.”

“That I can understand,” the Benga said evenly. “As much as I hate sitting here and not objecting as you plan an attack on my own people, I understand that it’s to save my people as a whole. They would stand no chance against you if the Board escalates this to a full war. I’ve seen your technology. You could destroy every inhabited planet in the galaxy, one by one, and we couldn’t stop you. You could annihilate every living thing in Andromeda,” he said in a powerful, controlled voice.

“That’s not how we conduct war, Lieutenant,” Lorna told him. “Our people don’t involve civilians.”

“There are no civilians in war,” Gen answered immediately. “And that is a fact you’d best understand about how *my* people conduct war.”

“That’s exactly why we’re trying to stop this before it spills over into our galaxy, to protect as many lives as possible on both sides,” Jason declared.

“And that’s the only reason why I’m helping you now,” Gen stated firmly.

“You’re a good man, Lieutenant,” Jason told him honestly, which made him look almost awkwardly embarrassed. “But I think there’s not much more you can help us with. With your indulgence, we’ll withdraw to discuss the nuts and bolts of the plan and let you return to Prakka. I heard you’ve been testing Marauder mecha using one-way interface control?”

“They’re allowing me to,” he nodded. “They converted my warmech and we’ve been testing using your interface system with Benga technology. It’s rather surprising how...permissive they’ve been towards me. It’s almost like they don’t think I’d betray them in a heartbeat if I felt it was best for my people.”

“To earn trust, you have to show trust, Lieutenant,” Jason told him simply. “And like I said, we don’t *want* to be your enemies, at least not forever. Once we recover the Dreamers from the Syndicate and we’re certain the Board will honor a peace treaty, we have no reason to fight with you anymore. You stay over here, we go back to our own galaxy, and everybody’s happy on our own sides of the galactic cluster.”

The Benga gave him a long look, then gave a solemn nod. “I have to say, now I see why your warmechs are so fearsome. You don’t control them manually. That gives you a major edge.”

“Believe me, I know, Lieutenant. You and me have the same job in our militaries. I may be a Grand Duke, but I’m also a warmech pilot, what we call a rigger. I serve my people in wartime as a warmech pilot.”

“Seriously?”

“I’m sure you’ve seen that we can pilot our mecha by remote. I’ll bet you’ve done it yourself, controlling your Marauder from a control room so they can observe the telemetry. That’s how I do it. I’m not allowed to fight in person for obvious reasons, so I control a warmech from remote merge. I take protecting the lives of my people seriously, Lieutenant. Seriously enough to fight shoulder to shoulder with my soldiers on the front lines to do it.”

The Benga gave him a long, surprised look, then his eyes almost shimmered as he took a very respectful expression. He then gave Jason a very slow, very deliberate salute. Jason drew up to attention and returned it just as seriously.

“Now if you’ll excuse us, we’ll get to work and let you get back to Prakka to continue the testing.”

“Yes, your Grace. It was an honor to meet you.”

“You as well, Lieutenant Ba Ru. You’re a good man. If all Benga were like you, I think I’d get along with your people very well.”

Instead of withdrawing to a conference room, Jason instead talked the others into going back down to the planet and conducting their talks in his office so they could be closer to the party. They pulled the chairs up to the other side of the desk and sat facing him, and once they were settled in, the

six of them fully discussed and fleshed out their overall plan of taking out the Board and using the offensive at V3ÄE-31 to both conceal what they were doing and recover the last of the Dreamers held by the Syndicate. It took them nearly three hours just to figure out how they were going to get around the Oracles that would predict the attack, and that was by fully and completely committing to the offensive. They couldn't attack until they had the Dreamers out and then pull back, that would tell the Oracles that the attack was just a diversion. They had to commit to taking the entire system, two planets, three large orbital stations, and two moons that had military bases and the ship construction docks that were scattered through the system. That was the system's primary function as a military base, shipbuilding. Yes, they had exercise ranges for infantry and warmechs, but that was just using available space. The entire system was primarily a shipbuilding facility.

But that was only half of the overall plan. The other half was going after the Board, and that was the realm of Miaari and Kraal. The two Handservants proved that they were every bit worthy of the white bar as they pooled their experience and intellect and came up with one of the most devious plans Jason had ever heard, which was necessary to get past the Oracles that would see an attack on the entire Board for what it was and warn them. And again, it all hinged on *intent*. The attack had to be done in such a way that it wasn't the intent of the attacker to kill his target, and the attack itself had to be one of *choice*, where death was only the result if the wrong choice was made. That would require them to directly negotiate with the current Board and do it personally...which would be how the attack would be delivered.

It would be done with spiders, medical spiders, which Syndicate scanners could not detect. The negotiator would bring them into the huge room where the Board met, and he would spread them like the carrier of a deadly disease. The negotiator would be like Typhoid Mary, carrying a deadly plague that she herself did not contract due to her immunity. The way around the Oracles was to bring in the spiders and allow them to invade the members of the Board, but not activate them unless the Board made the wrong decision. And all they had to do was get those spiders into the chamber where the Board held its meetings, and have as many members

of the Board present as possible so it maximized the chance that the spiders could infect them.

It would be dangerous. To fool the board, they'd have to send someone there that wasn't a bionoid, and it would have to be someone important enough for the Board to agree to a meeting. Of course, the Board would simply see it as an opportunity to capture the emissary and either extract concessions out of the Confederation for his safe return or kill him out of revenge. It would have to be someone that could stand in that room and get out alive, either through the door or through the window.

It would have to be *Jason*. The bait would have to be enticing enough for them to risk the prediction of the Oracles that their lives were on the table, or to possibly discount the danger since the Oracles were making conflicting predictions. A member of the Confederate Council would be too irresistible to pass up, especially the one that had ordered the attacks that destroyed their manors and property. And of the members of the council, Jason was the best choice to do this due to his abilities. Jason was a top-tier, exceptionally well trained telepath that could stand up to their mindbenders, and with a tactical gestalt close enough for him to access, he'd have more than enough power to take them if it came down to a fight. His status as a Generation would give him the best chance of any member of the council to get out of that room alive, either walking out the door or throwing himself out a window. The Board and the Syndicate did not know about biogenics, did not know that Jason would walk in there carrying a device that significantly amplified his psionic abilities. And while he would be able to kill everyone in the room if it came down to it, the fact that he *wasn't* there to do that would fool the Oracles. He would genuinely be there to try to get a peace treaty out of the Board, even though he knew it was a doomed venture. There was no *certainty* of death for the Board in his arrival, only the *chance* of it. And to make them take the bait, take that risk, they needed bait that the Board could not pass up.

Jason Karinne.

It was almost fitting. Jason had said he'd do virtually anything to stop this war, and now he knew he'd have to put his own life on the line to make it come about.

Jason would be the bait that they couldn't resist, but what they didn't know was that Jason was not the cheese in the mouse trap...he was the trap itself.

"Are you sure about this, cousin?" Zaa asked intensely. "It would be the most dangerous thing you have ever done. Far more than your actions on Terra with the Legion."

"My life is not worth the billions that would be lost if this war escalates, Denmother," he said with simple clarity. "The only way they'll agree to the meeting is if we use bait they absolutely cannot resist, bait that will make them take the risk that the Oracles see in the meeting. And while our bionoids will fool their sensors, it won't fool their telepaths, so I have to go myself. And let's be honest here. No other member of the Council has a better chance to survive that meeting more than I do. Not even *you*. I'm the one that caused this mess. And by God, I'll be the one to fix it," he declared in a powerful voice.

"Cousin, think carefully about this," Miaari said, with far more emotion than Zaa exhibited. "Even if you survive the meeting with the Board, they will not let you go. They will try to capture you. You will be a fugitive on E Chaio and would have to reach a beacon extraction point with heavy pursuit. The entire planet will be after you. And if they do capture you, we may not be able to get you back. As skilled as Handgroom is, not even he may have the resources to free you from a Syndicate prison in time to save you before you're executed."

"I know what I'm getting into, Mee," he said, putting a comforting hand on her shoulder as her eyes shimmered, looking at him almost pleadingly. "But what you forget is that before I was the Grand Duke, I was a *soldier*. I knew what I was getting into when I rebelled against Trillane, and I know what I'm getting into now. If it stops this war, if it saves uncountable lives, I will *take that risk*," he said intensely.

"We can mitigate that risk with planning," Kraal said. "Maps of the old tunnels under the city Jason can memorize. Multiple beacon locations easily reachable from the capitol complex. Kimdori in strategic positions to assist. Equipment caches in close proximity to the capitol complex if he can't easily make it to a close beacon, so he has armor and a tactical gestalt available for protection. Multiple contingency plans so he always has a plan

of action on which to fall back, so he always knows what to do next. But truly, the key will be reaching a nexus bridge. And since the Syndicate's science does not know what they are, we could place one literally in plain sight within line of sight of the capitol complex. If he could reach that position, we could bridge him home."

"You will make those plans, Handgroom, and be thorough. Our cousin's life will depend on it," Zaa ordered in a powerful voice.

"He's my friend too, my Denmother," Kraal said simply. "I'll do everything I can to get him home safely."

"As a military commander, I can see the value in your plan and the logic in your reasoning, Jason," Lorna said. "But as your aunt, I object to this in the strongest possible terms. You are my nephew. I love you just as much I do any blood relative in our family. And if that's not enough, you are the Grand Duke Karinne. You mean too much to me, too much to my nieces and nephews, too much to Jyslin, too much to the house, to take this kind of awful risk."

"And I appreciate how much you care, Aunt Lorna," he told her. "But look me in the eyes and tell me that anyone else could pull this off."

She couldn't answer. She could only look away from him with a pained expression.

"Alright then. That's what we're going to do," he declared. "And I don't think I have to say it, but I will anyway. Mee, Kraal, Denmother, my life is in your hands," he said, looking at them. "Lorna and the CCM can plan everything out to get me there and plan out the offensive to decoy the Syndicate so we can recover the Dreamers, Myli can prepare the spiders for the operation, and I'll handle setting the trap with the Board. But after it's over, no matter the outcome of that meeting, I will absolutely be depending on you to get me home. I have put my life in your hands before, and I do so now with no reservations. You have never let me down, and you never will," he declared.

"We will get you home, cousin. That is my sacred vow to you," Kraal said in an intense voice. "On my honor as a Handgroom and the worth of my life, *you will get home.*"

Jason gave him a bit of a startled look. That particular oath, Kraal had just vowed to get him home or die. If Jason died, if he didn't make it home, Kraal would kill himself in shame over his failure.

"And mine as well," Miaari stated, standing up. "On my honor as a Handmaiden and the worth of my life, Jason Karinne, you will get home."

"No. *No*," he said intensely, standing up himself, reaching over his desk, and pushing Miaari back down. "You will not do this. You will not kill yourselves over me," he declared, which made Lorna's eyes widen. "This plan is too risky for all of us to risk our lives over it. Denmother and the Kimdori will need you if I don't make it back. My family will need you, both of you, Miaari's protection and Kraal's wisdom and experience that he can teach to them. Don't take that away from them. Don't compound my family's loss needlessly, and orphan Maalet, Haan, and Yemaari. You take that vow back, right now, both of you, or so help me by every Denmother and Denfather that ever lived that I will kick both of your asses here and now."

"Jason—"

"I said *take it back*," he nearly hissed, glaring down at her. "I want to hear it, Mee, I want to hear it from both of you. Right now. Say. The. Words."

She looked up at him, almost defiantly, but not even Miaari could cross swords with an angry Jason Karinne for long. She sighed and lowered her eyes. "I bid my Denmother's permission to absolve my vow," she said, almost sullenly.

"As do I. I seek absolution of my vow, my Denmother," Kraal added, staring at Jason as he said it. His expression was not nearly as compliant as his words.

"Honorable absolution is granted," Zaa said formally. "I commend your devotion and your commitment, my Handservants, but Jason is right. I *need* you. Our cousins will *need* you if Jason does not make it back," she declared. "If you fail in this sacred task, your penance will be to serve Jason's family and descendants faithfully as protectors, teachers, and guides for the rest of your days. This do I declare as Denmother."

“I obey, my Denmother,” they said in nearly perfect unison, a formulaic response to a formal command.

“All we need is a timeline, and some preparation on E Chaio,” Jason said. “And to start the countdown, I need to talk to Myli and Cybi for sure, Songa only if we must. They may need to make some adjustments to the medical spiders to do what we need them to do...and we may need to limit Songa’s knowledge of the plan,” he grunted. “Doctors don’t kill, and if she finds out we’re designing the medical spiders to kill the Board, she may refuse to help. I’m fairly sure that Myli and the CBIMs can design an assassin spider without Songa. Once we know when the spiders can be ready, we can build a comprehensive timeline so everything happens when it needs to happen to keep the Oracles from being able to accurately predict what’s coming and get me into the Board’s council chambers carrying the payload. That should give Kraal and Miaari enough time to prepare the plan to get me off E Chaio, and it should also give me enough time to prepare for whatever may come.”

“Agreed. The first thing we need to do is get a tactical gestalt close enough to that room for Jason to access,” Zaa said, looking at Kraal. “Can it be done, Handgroom?”

He leaned back a little in his chair, scratching the underside of his chin. “It would be possible,” he said hesitantly, “but very risky. The security within the capitol complex is quite formidable. But it would carry definite risk. It would come down to how well we can keep it hidden. They conduct regular security sweeps of all equipment and maintenance areas to search for alien devices, a measure adopted after a bomb destroyed four floors of the building some 140 years ago in an assassination attempt. We could get it in there, but there’s no guarantee that it will stay undetected for long. But there’s another way to get a tactical gestalt into the building, one that Jason will carry with him that they can’t detect.”

“How, in my pants, Kraal?” Jason asked.

“In your *arm*,” he replied, reaching over and pulling Jason’s arm out, then touched it just above the elbow. “We remove Jason’s arm right here and replace it with an endolimb. Rook has made considerable advances in building the biogenic circuitry that controls a bionoid into the metal bones, so we do that here. Rook designs a tactical gestalt that fits within the metal

bones of the endolimb, and we use the same Kimdori SCM we use in the infiltrator bionoids to fool scanners to hide that fact. To their scanners, Jason's arm will appear to be flesh and blood, and the fact that it *is* flesh and blood on the outside will further hide that fact. That gives Jason a tactical gestalt considerably more powerful than his interface model that the Syndicate cannot remove, one that they can't take away from him."

"That has potential," Zaa said with an approving nod.

"Wait, you want to cut off my arm?" Jason protested.

"Think about it, cousin. Is that not the best way to get a tactical gestalt into the room with you?" Kraal asked. "And we can keep your organic arm and reattach it after the operation. Karinne medical science is more than capable of it."

He was about to say something, but then he shut his mouth and thought about it. Zora had an endolimb, and she actually liked it better than the arm she lost. It didn't cause her any problems at all, it didn't affect the quality of her life in any way, and in fact, it was quite useful to her since she could disable the limiters that caused it to adhere to her natural norms and access the limb's mechanical strength. So, walking in there with an endolimb wasn't going to hinder him in any way if it came down to a fight; in fact, it may help him out more than if he had a natural arm. And Kraal was right about the tactical. Rook could probably incorporate a fairly strong tactical gestalt into the arm, within its foamed iso-aluminum "bones," one that would give him a major boost to his psionic power, more than enough to repel their mindstrickers and give him serious power with his telekinesis. It wouldn't be anything like the tactical in a vehicle, but it didn't need to be. It only had to be strong enough for him to be able to get out of that room alive.

"I...I guess," he said, pulling his arm back. "I just find the idea, I dunno...creepy. But I guess I shouldn't. This isn't my original hand," he said, grabbing his right wrist with his left hand. "Alright, we go with that. We'll need to talk to Rook and Songa, see what Rook can come up with and warn Songa about the replacement operation. But we need to make sure it fits within the timetable," he warned. "We have to do this relatively quickly, before they organize their fleets and launch them for the Milky Way. If I remember right, Songa can replace an arm with an endolimb in about five

days, which includes growing the tissue and skin over the endolimb. I'd more or less have to start the process today to have it ready in time. So we need to talk to Rook immediately."

"Is Rook not here right now?" Zaa asked.

"Yes, he is. I'll call him up. Songa too." *[Rook.]*

[Yes, Jason?]

[Come up to my office. Songa, come up to my office, I need to talk to you.]

[I'll be up in a bit,] she answered.

"When are we warning the council?" Zaa asked as they waited.

"Tomorrow, I suppose," he answered. "They can't really stop it, but they deserve to know I'm doing it."

"They can stop it, cousin," Zaa disagreed. "But I don't think they will. It is dangerous, but it is our best chance to stop this war before it turns into what none of us want. Besides, more than a few of the council's members would see your death as an opportunity to gain the secrets of House Karinne," Zaa said darkly. "They know that Rann would in no way be ready to handle the complex political position of the house."

"I know. I may have to consider something radical," he grunted, drumming his fingers on the table. "I may have Myli declared regent to run the house until Rann comes of age. She'd be the best choice. She could handle the job long enough for Rann to prepare for the responsibility, and she wouldn't want to keep the throne, so I trust her to abdicate when Rann is ready. But what's most important, Myli has the raw nerve to stare down the members of the council. She could keep things stable until Rann is ready."

"Myleena may not be the best choice, cousin," Zaa said. "She has the intelligence and the education, but the house needs her elsewhere. In actuality, I would suggest *Jyslin*," she stressed.

"No, Denmother," Jason said with a sigh. "Jyslin will be in no shape to do anything if I die. If she even survives it. We're too intertwined. If I die, she won't make it. That's why I need Miaari there, to help Rann deal with

being orphaned and help teach and guide him to prepare him for the throne. I'm fully aware that it's not just *my* life I'm risking here, that Jyslin is as much at risk as I am. But it's still the best choice. It's really our only choice."

"I would concur with Jason, my Denmother," Miaari nodded. "Jyslin and Jason are too deeply pair bonded. Even if she survives his loss...she would never be the same."

"I will be guided by you, cousin. But it puts us back at the same problem, the fact that Rann cannot lead the house as a child, and Myleena is not the best choice to act as regent."

"There...is another choice," Kraal said. "There is one person that could hold the entire house together and prepare Rann for his duties. *Cybi*," he said, looking at them. "The house accepts her as a figure of great authority, and if you decree her to be regent, the house will obey your word. And *Cybi* herself would be more than capable of the task. She can run the house efficiently and with compassion, and she has enough experience to deal with the council. They won't be tricking or intimidating *her*," he said strongly. "In my opinion, *Cybi* is not just the best choice, she is the only choice."

"You...just may be right, cousin," Jason said after considering the idea a moment. *Cybi* was indeed more than capable of running the house, and she would pass the throne to Rann when he was ready without trying to take it for herself. In addition, she was more than politically savvy enough to keep the council on their heels. Kraal was right that there was no way anyone on the council was going to trick or swindle *Cybi*. And the very fact that she was the one holding Jason's chair until Rann was ready would intimidate the council in its own right. "In fact, I agree with your assessment. *Cybi* is the best choice as regent. With the other CBIMs there to assist her, she can keep the house prospering, hold her own on the council, and make sure Rann is more than ready to take his rightful place when he comes of age. She'll turn him into a better Grand Duke than I ever was."

"I would disagree with that statement, cousin," Miaari told him with a gentle smile. "You are far more than you believe yourself to be."

“Then we’d better involve Cybi in this...the rest of the biogenics as well. *[I need Myleena and all the CBIMs and CBMOMs to come up to my office,]* he sent his commune through the house.

[What’s going on, love?] Jyslin asked, her thought muddled by the fact she was more than a little drunk.

[I’ll explain later. You just keep enjoying yourself, love. This is your day, relish every second of it.]

They arrived in a steady stream, and Jason didn’t explain anything until everyone was there. There weren’t enough seats for everyone in his office, so he had the guards carry in a chairs for Songa and Myleena, and they all sat or stood in a semi-circle around his desk, with him behind it and Cybi and Cyra sitting demurely on the corners of it, as was their long-standing custom. It was then that he explained what they were going to do, and he could see the surprise on even Cybi’s face as he explained their plan.

“Are you *insane*, dear?” Songa protested, jumping out of her chair and slamming her hands on the edge of his desk, glaring at him. She nearly knocked Miaari out of the way to do it. “It’s too much of a risk!”

“I’m the only one that can do it,” he told her evenly. “No other member of the council is a Generation. I’ll be walking into that room with an arsenal of weapons that the Benga can’t take away from me, and I’m going to use them to make sure I get out of there and back to Karis alive. Kraal has his claws deep into E Chaio, and he’ll have Kimdori in place to assist once I get out of the capitol building. Trust me, dear, this isn’t some adolescent superhero fantasy. I know how dangerous this is, but I don’t see any other way. If it stops this war, if it saves *billions* of lives, then I will take that risk,” he said strongly, staring her right in the eyes. “Now, you can spend the next five days fighting with me tooth and claw and losing, or you can do everything you can to make sure I come back home alive. You’d better make that choice right here, right now, so I have enough time to call in another doctor to do the endolimb attachment.”

She nearly broke into tears at the tone of his voice, but the steady, unwavering gaze he gave her assured her that he wasn’t saying it just to be cruel. She gave a bit of a sniffle and surrendered a defeated nod, then sat

back down. Cyrsi stepped over and leaned over her chair and wrapped her arms around her shoulders to comfort her.

“Rook. Bottom line it. What can you build that can be ready tomorrow morning?”

“I can have a unit ready, but it won’t have enough power to complete the mission, Jason,” he replied. “Amplifiers stacks take up a lot of room, and the bones in a forearm endolimb don’t have much room. I will either have to replace the entire arm at the shoulder and install the tactical in the humerus section, or replace both arms at the elbow and split the tactical into a cascading tandem unit built into the radius of each forearm.”

“Well, that’s lovely,” he said darkly. “Songa, which is best from a recovery perspective? What will get me off the sickbed and into action fastest?”

She sniffled. “Replacing the arm at the shoulder is a very involved procedure with considerable recovery, due to how the arm connects to the musculature of the chest and back,” she answered. “You’d be best served going with two forearm endolimbs replaced above the elbow and with reinforcement of the remaining humerus with titanium-Telvestrium alloy strands to give the unit increased strength and leverage for un-limited applications. We could complete the tissue and skin growth procedure in four to five days once the endolimbs are attached.”

“So, I’m basically not going to have arms for the next five days. Lovely,” he sighed. “But oh well. I’ll roll with it. Myli, can you design the spiders we need?”

“I already have them,” she replied, ignoring the sudden look from Songa. “I had the idea of using spiders as assassination units a year ago, so I’ve already designed a kill unit. The spiders are designed to stop the heart from the inside and make it appear the victim died of heart failure. I can have a few billion mass produced and ready in three days.”

“And they won’t pose a threat to me?”

“Of course not. I can DNA encode them so they only attack Benga. To you, they’ll be completely harmless.”

“Do it. Just make sure they’re not the self-replicating variety. We don’t want to unleash a plague on E Chaio.”

“No sweat, Jayce,” she nodded. “They’d be dormant without broadcast power anyway.”

“Speaking of that, can we get a broadcast power node close enough to the capitol building to power the spiders?” he asked, looking at Kraal.

“Easily. The unit we have in the factory will power the spiders from where it is. We just need to increase it to full power.”

“Good deal. Now, I’ve clearly taken into account the possibility that I may not make it back,” he said evenly. “I’ve decided to name Cybi as regent if that happens. She will run the house until Rann comes of age and is ready to take up his duties. And if that happens, it is the responsibility of everyone in this room to support Cybi in any way possible and ensure that Rann is fully and completely ready when his time comes,” he said in a powerful voice. “Remember, all of you, that Jyslin will be in no condition to take care of our kids and may not be for quite a while. I’ll need you to stand in for us, be the parents that my kids will need, teach them, love them, and remind them that I did what I did *because* I love them. Don’t take them out of their house. Ayama, Surin, and Seido will be the ones to take care of their daily needs, and the rest of you make sure they grow up with all the love, attention, and care they’ll need to be everything they can be. I’m counting on you,” he said. He was quiet a moment to let that process that, then moved on before they dwelled too much on the negative. “Cybi, I didn’t choose you on a whim. You’re the best choice given our current political situation,” he said, looking over at her as she gave him a look of concern and worry. “The house respects you and will follow you as a regent, because they know that you will do your duty and install Rann as Grand Duke when he’s ready. And you’ll be able to keep the council in line. If I’m not here, you know that they’ll do everything they can to either intimidate or trick whoever takes my place into giving up the secrets of the house, or abandoning our strict code of ethics, to sell out to greed or the lust for power and destabilize the entire galactic cluster. But they’ll know beyond any doubt that there’s no way in hell you’ll let that happen,” he said, patting her leg. “And that you’ll make sure Rann won’t let that happen either. If there is anyone on Karis I know is absolutely incorruptible, it is

you and your sisters and brothers. I can't even make that claim. You are the anchor to our past, the gentle hand that keeps us on the righteous path, and you will confidently guide us into the future I've worked almost half of my life to bring about," he told her. "The house is in good hands with you and the other biogenic units helping you keep things together and prepare Rann for his duties."

"Jason," she said in a tremulous voice. "I'm no leader. We aren't programmed to rule."

"You don't need to be to be the best choice for this job," he told her. "You are the best choice to act as regent until Rann is ready, Cybi, because your love for the house and for my family will carry you. And you don't have to do it alone. You may be the regent, but you have the other biogenic units, you have the Denmother and the Handservants, you have Lorna, you have the other Generations, you have many people you can trust to help you complete your task. I know you can do it, Cybi. I'm so sure of it, I'm entrusting the most precious things in my life to you, my people and my family, because I know that they are safe with you."

She reached over and put a hand on his cheek, saying and communing nothing.

"But excuse me if I tell you I hope and pray that you don't have to do that job," he added with a gentle smile, patting the hand she had on his cheek, "because I fully intend to come home."

"Nothing would make me happier than to avoid that particularly promotion," Jason," she said with an emotional smile.

"Anyway, I think all of us have a lot of work to do and sitting here talking about it isn't going to get it done," he said, looking at them. "Rook, get the endolimb units built as fast as you can. Myli, start producing the spiders. Songa, get things ready for the operation. Cybi, you and the others help where you can. Lorna, you'll have any KMS asset you need for the offensive. Zaa, Kraal, Mee, get things ready, I'm counting on you to get me home. You can start training me on that part of the plan after I wake up from the arm replacement surgery. I won't really have much else to do," he said dryly.

"When are we going to warn the council, Jason?" Zaa asked.

“Tomorrow, after we get our plans organized and have a timeline, so we have something comprehensive to present. That way they can’t interfere else they jeopardize the mission,” he replied. “Not that many of them are going to object too much, drooling over the idea of me not being here, but I’m sure Dahnai, Kreel, and Krirara may have something to say about my plan. We’ll need the council to make contact with the Syndicate and set up the diplomatic meeting with the Board. Kraal, what I need you to do is feed the Board the info that I was the one that blew up their houses so they recognize the name of the emissary coming to talk them in person, and get that info to them *before* they find out I’m the one coming. That little tidbit should be enough to make them discount the danger the Oracles will predict and agree to the meeting, because they’ll see it as their chance to personally witness their revenge against me for what I did. Personally, I’m going to go back down to the party and not say a word, so I don’t take anything away from Jyslin’s or Jenn and Meya’s day...and I don’t get locked in a dungeon by Aya,” he added dryly. “I’ll tell her in the morning, right before I go to the annex. We’ll meet again tomorrow after I wake up and consolidate our plans and build a definite timetable. Does that sound good to everyone?” When no one objected, he stood up. “Then let’s get it done,” he declared.

He could sense their trepidation as they filed out of his office, their fear and worry about his plan, but he knew it was the only real way to do this. Any other way could kill millions, *billions* of people, and he could never live with that on his conscious knowing that he could have done something about it. And under it all was the simple fact that this was *his* fault. He was the one that came up with the plan to attack the Board’s possessions, he was the one that ordered it carried out. This was *his* fault, the escalation of the war was solidly on *his* shoulders, and now he was going to personally put things right. It didn’t matter to him that it put his life at risk. The only real concern he felt over this was what would happen to Jyslin if he died, because she shouldn’t have to suffer for his mistake. But in the end, at the heart of it all, his life, and maybe Jyslin’s life, were not worth the mountains of dead that would result if he did nothing.

He was at fault. It was his responsibility to fix this, even if it was an insanely dangerous, audacious plan.

But that audacity might be the very quality that would make it work. No way in hell would the pampered members of the Board believe that Jason

Karinne was willing to risk his life so recklessly. They would certainly think he wouldn't stand before them without a plan, without an objective, but they would believe he had some kind of plan that didn't involve the very real possibility of his own demise. They would see him as overconfident and woefully ignorant of Benga customs—an assumption reinforced by his attack on their property—and they would see it as a chance to use it against him and the Confederation by either holding him hostage or killing him as a warning to the council. They wouldn't see that he was using their own tendencies against them, counting on their need to gloat in his face to allow him in the same room with them. They were cunning and intelligent, but they were cowards, and what was more, they saw all others as a reflection of their own cowardice. The members of the Board had no idea what duty and honor were all about, would consider men willing to sacrifice their lives for others to be utterly insane, and would never in a million years assign those kinds of qualities in a ruler. They would think that Jason Karinne would not be willing to die for what he believed in, because men in positions of power did not risk their own lives.

They had no idea how wrong they were.

He'd said it before, he'd say it again, and it certainly applied in this scenario:

Sometimes crazy *works*.

He rejoined the party, which was still in full swing despite having been going on for nearly seven hours, being careful to guard his thoughts while he was in direct contact with Jyslin. But, given she was drunk, it wasn't as hard as it usually would be. This was her big day, and he wasn't going to dampen her joy by weighing her down with worry for him. She wouldn't like his plan, but she would be able to accept it. Despite her love for him, she was a rational and practical woman, and once the plan was explained to her in detail, she would see the value of it despite her personal involvement in the danger into which he was placing himself.

Aya was the one that wasn't going to accept it. He might have to have her locked in a cell until after he left, to prevent her from locking *him* in a cell to keep him from leaving.

It was a good thing he'd had so many years in politics, it was the only thing that kept a smile on his face. It was hard to believe sometimes that he had come to Karis as the Grand Duke Karinne at 22 and had ruled the house for seven years. Seven years...where did the time go? It seemed like just yesterday that Rann was still in diapers, and the planet beyond Kosiningi and Karsa was a barren wasteland. In just seven years, the entire continent of Karga had been terraformed, was now a lush verdant bloom of grass and trees and life from coast to coast, and the other continents were well on their way to joining it. If the projections held, the organic infusion process would be finished in just five more years, which would enable the soil of the entire planet to support plant life. And as the green spread across Hirga, Sarga, Kirga, and Virga, so did the population. Where did the time go? When did his son get so old? It was almost startling to him, how much things had changed in what seemed a blink of the eyes.

And it was a surprise to think that he wasn't even *thirty*. He was 29 years old, but sometimes, he felt like he was 80. He had lived so much of his life in the last eight years, it was like he'd packed an entire lifetime into those years. Dahnai was nearly twenty years older than him. Jyslin was seven years older than him. Symone was six years older than him. He was the youngest member of the council, a fact that most of them probably didn't even realize.

He had come so far so quickly, and had so much life left in front of him...provided he survived to see 30.

He made the rounds through the party as the sun started to set, then walked out onto the deck to look out over the ocean. Leaning on the rail, the wind tousling his blond hair, he lifted his head when a shadow fell over him. The alpha male wolf had padded up behind him and then sat down, towering over him, so close that his chest was nearly against Jason's shoulders and his front paws were to each side of his feet. The wolf leaned over his head and looked down at him, his expression sober but his eyes inquisitive. "I'm alright," he told the giant canine, then he reached up and over his head and scrubbed his fingers into the shaggy tuft between the giant wolf's front legs...then considering that by this time tomorrow, he wouldn't *have* the hand that was scratching through the wolf's thick fur.

Nobody on the council had better fucking *ever* doubt his moral convictions and devotion to peace after this. Not when he was willing to put *everything* on the line to protect his house, his allies, and his galaxy from the Andromedans. One by one, the other wolves joined them, until it was him and the entire pack of five, the wolves almost surrounding him protectively at the rail as they watched the gas giant rise over the ocean directly in front of them, sharp and brilliant in the darkening sky, the cloud bands on the planet's surface distinct.

And to think, ten years ago today, he was halfway through the spring semester of his freshman year at Michigan and had no idea that the arrival of the Faey and the subjugation was just months away.

That was a lifetime ago. It was almost as if it had been some prior incarnation of him, a past life, because it seemed so, so...*disconnected* from his life now. It almost shamed him to think that he hadn't thought of his father all takir, or his mother. If they were alive today, he wondered how they would feel, what they would say about where he was, how he had gotten here, and what he was about to do to protect it.

He knew what his father would say. He'd tell him that he'd never been prouder of his son in his life. But unfortunately, his mother had died so long ago, his memories of her had become less and less potent over the years since she died, he really didn't know how she would react. Now, she was a misty recollection, and he could barely remember her face. But her hands... he remembered her hands, and her voice. And in a way, that was all he *needed* to remember to honor her and her memory.

He wondered if, in 30 years, his son would stand in front of a window and realize that he couldn't remember his father's voice.

He looked down at the rail and realized that there was a small animal there. It almost looked like a cross between a ferret and an otter, a small, long-bodied rodent native to the coastline that was one of the few non-flying animals able to navigate the rocky cliffs of the shore and get down into the water. It must have climbed up onto the deck from the support beams underneath. It looked up at him with curious eyes, standing up on its back legs to more easily regard him. He gave it a gentle smile and patted it on the head, then looked back out over the water, considering the next few days. He'd have that operation to replace his arms and would spend the

convalescent time preparing for the mission, both with planning and with training. He was going to have Mrar teach him everything she possibly could in the time he had before leaving for E Chaio that might help him get out of that building alive, get him back to his wife, his *amu*, his children, and his friends. He was going to be ready when the time came, because his life would literally depend on how well prepared he was when he walked through that door and faced down the Board. Yes, the mission would technically be accomplished the moment he got inside the room, since that would deliver the package to the targets, but he had no intention of being a martyr. He had no intention of his own armor standing in the Hall of Heroes at the White House, the armor that represented the greatest heroes of the KMS that had willingly sacrificed their lives in service to the house. Jason had once vowed that he wouldn't allow another suit of armor to be placed in that hall, and he meant to keep it by not adding his own.

He just had to be ready. To save his own life, to protect Jyslin from wasting away and dying because he didn't make it, to ensure that he lived to see Karis restored, he had to be ready.

He would be ready.

Something was...weird.

Rann couldn't quite put his finger on what it was, but over the last few hours, he had felt...disquieted. Strange. It was a deep feeling, like a forgotten dream bubbling up from the dark corners of his imagination, not frightening but not normal, just...*off*.

He just couldn't shake the feeling. No matter how much Shy or Aria or his brothers and sisters tried to get him to have fun, he just wasn't in the mood. As they ran around and played and enjoyed the party, he'd sat at a picnic table over on the deck by the swimming pool, trying to figure it out. It wasn't like they didn't have plenty to be happy about. The Paladins had won the big match, Jenn and Meya had gotten married—he really liked both of them, Jenn was awesome and Meya was funny—and the new vacation house was finished, and it was seriously cool. But despite all that, he couldn't shake that feeling.

For hours he tried to figure it out, but to no avail. At first, he thought it was because his father wasn't there, that he'd been called away on some important business, which was something Rann more or less expected. Dad was very busy and he had a lot of responsibilities, and he'd always said that those responsibilities were more important than fun. But that wasn't it. When Dad came back, going straight to his office, it didn't make him feel any different. And when he finally came out and rejoined the party, it didn't change it either. He kept thinking about it for a while, at least until he realized that he hadn't seen Amber for hours. She sometimes took naps in hidden places, so it wasn't entirely strange for her to be gone for so long, but he realized that she didn't really know the new house that well, and she might have gotten lost. He communed with the house's computer, and it told him that Amber was out on the deck, which was a relief. She hadn't gotten lost. But it was a bit strange that she'd be out there all by herself.

He got up and walked through the house to get back to the deck and stopped short at the door outside and gawked. At the rail across the deck, dozens and dozens of animals were sitting. Big ones, like the wolves. Little ones, like the little mice-like rodents that were all over the field. Mammals, birds, reptiles, everything in between, there had to be forty or fifty animals out here! Amber was out there with them, as were all the tabis. Birds were on the roof high over his head, lined up on the edge and looking down, and swarms of insects flew in circular patterns near the edge of the deck, were crawling between the larger animals, moving towards the center of them... all of them looking in the same place. Rann couldn't see what they were all looking at because the wolves were in the way, but it struck him as really strange that wild animals would collect on the deck, animals that would usually eat other, just sitting or standing and all looking to the same spot.

He moved carefully through the animals, having to watch his step so he didn't step on any tails or bodies of the tiny ones or bugs, he managed to get close enough to look around the biggest of the wolves and see what they were all looking at.

Dad.

He was standing at the rail with the biggest of the wolves right behind him, not moving, just staring out over the ocean. But something, something had to be wrong. The animals, they didn't usually act like this, and he knew

that Dad has some kind of special connection to animals. They understood him, he could talk to them, and it had to be that special connection that was causing this. The animals, they were *responding* to Dad, responding to something that Rann couldn't hear, or sense.

No. They were responding to the feeling of *foreboding* that Rann had been feeling all night, a feeling coming from his father. It had unsettled them, and they had come to try to comfort Dad, called by his worry and seeking to make him feel better. Dad's special connection to the animals had called them to him.

What could it be? Dad was hiding it from Mom, or she would be out here too. They were like him and Shy, he knew what Shy was thinking almost all the time, and he could feel it when she was afraid or sad. Dad was hiding how he felt from Mom, and that in and of itself was really strange...and really worrying. Dad almost never hid what he was feeling unless it was bad, and if it had caused the animals to come to him to cheer him up, then it had to be *really* bad.

Dad was dreading something. And he was *afraid*, a feeling that Rann almost felt his father would never feel. His father was the bravest man in the whole world!

He carefully picked his way through the animals—and very nearly stepped on some bugs a few times—but managed to get all the way through the throng and reach his father. He was standing by the rail, his hands on it, and there were little birds and one of the small bats sitting on his shoulders, those adorable water otters standing on the rail to each side of his hands. His father didn't move, didn't seem to realize he was there, he just stood motionless as he stared off into space, his eyes half-open and unfocused, as if he were daydreaming. But the expression on his face was not very encouraging. A gust of wind carried over them, which caused his father to close his eyes and lift his chin upwards a little bit, then he opened them again and returned to looking out into the void.

[*Dad?*]

He didn't move. He didn't answer.

Dad? "Dad?" Rann called aloud, a tingle of, of *fear* starting to creep up his spine.

He blinked and looked down at him, his expression unchanging, then he reached over and put his hand on his head. But then he put his hand back on the rail and returned to looking out into space. *[You'll need to be brave for the next several days, Rann,]* he finally answered, communing so tightly that only Rann would hear him. Not even a listener like Shy would pick that up. *[There's something I have to do. Something that your mother and many others won't like. Something that only I can do. But it has to be done.]*

[Why does it scare you so much, Dad? The animals, they're trying to cheer you up.]

[Because I may not come back,] he answered honestly, without looking down at him to soften that blow. *[If that happens, Rann, you have to promise me something.]*

[What?] he asked, his thought betraying his sudden shock and fear.

[Don't let your mother give up,] he answered. *[She has to live for you. For the girls. For the babies. Don't let her give up, don't let your sisters grow up without ever knowing their mother. Don't let them grow up unable to remember her face,]* he communed intensely, powerful emotion rooted in his own experience, Rann knew. Dad's mom had died when he was a little boy, and he didn't even have a picture of her because of how House Trillane treated people when the Faey first arrived on Terra. *[No matter how much she wants to give up, don't let her. Don't ever let her. It's going to be up to you, son. You're the only one that can save her,]* he warned, finally looking down at him. *[No matter how much she cries, no matter how much she begs, no matter how much she tries to ignore you, no matter how much she tries to push you away or gets angry with you, do not ever let her give up. Do you understand?]*

He nearly lost all coherent thought as the idea of his father never coming home and his mother just giving up hit him like a hammer. Why would Dad never come back? He was the strongest, smartest, most incredible Dad in the whole world! Dad was his hero! He was everyone's hero! The whole house loved him, he was like a dad to everyone! Why would he go? Why did he have to do it? And why did he think he may not come back? But when Dad looked down at him, his steady gaze snapped Rann out of his scattered thoughts and made him swallow nervously. *[I promise, Dad, but I'm scared now.]*

[You are Rann Brian Fox Shaddale Karinne, son. You are the next Grand Duke Karinne. You will be a great man someday, far better than I will ever be,] he declared with simple dignity, looking down at him. *[Don't ever forget who you are, son, but don't let who you are blind you to your duty to the house and the responsibility it entails. You serve the House of Karinne. The House of Karinne does not serve you. That is why I have to go, I have a duty to the house, and it will be very dangerous. I may not come back. But it has to be done, because I serve the house.]* He was quiet a long moment. *[If I don't come back, son, I've made some decisions. You're not ready to lead the house yet. You have a lot more to learn. So, I've decided that Cybi will run the house while you grow up and prepare. Cybi will be a regent son, meaning she will be temporarily in charge while you get ready to take over for her. If that happens, son, your greatest duty will be to make sure that you're ready to be the Grand Duke when Cybi steps aside,]* he communed, looking down at him. *[There's a lot more you need to learn. There's a lot more you have to see, to experience, before you're ready. If I don't come home, it will be your duty to take my place, to lead the House of Karinne and take care of our people. So promise me that you will be ready when your time comes.]*

[Don't think like that, Dad, if you think of bad things, bad things happen,] he nearly pleaded in reply. *[You'll come back. You have to come back. You have to!]*

His father turned and knelt in front of him, which put Rann's head just above his, and put his powerful hands on his shoulders. *[I know this is hard to understand, and forgive me if this sounds harsh, but you don't have the luxury to act like a child when the house needs you to act like an adult, Rann,]* he told him, staring him in the eyes. *[I wish it didn't have to be that way, but it does. You and me, we weren't chosen for this job, son. The job chose us, and like it or not, we do what we need to do for the house. If I don't come back, the house will need you. They'll be sad, and scared, and confused, and Cybi will need your help to keep people from being depressed, to remind them of what it means to be in the House of Karinne. Cybi can run the house, son, but she can't inspire the people the way you can. The house will need you the same way Aria needed you when she first came to live here. No matter how sad you are, or how much you'll want to cry, you keep a smile on your face and do everything you can to keep the*

smiles on the faces of the people who depend on us. And nobody will need that more than your mother. Do you understand?]

He gave his father a long, surprised look, then gave a silent nod.

[That's my boy,] he communed with pride rippling across his thought. *[I believe in you, Rann. I believe that once you grow up and have time to prepare, you'll be a better Grand Duke than me. The greatest Grand Duke the house has ever known. Just believe in yourself and believe in the House of Karinne. The people of the house are your family, and family sticks together always.]* He felt a nudging at his foot and looked down to see Amber staring up at him, her paw on his foot, giving him the most serious look he'd ever seen on her furry little face. One of the little birds jumped from his father's shoulder to his own, just over Dad's hand, and gave a supportive little chirp. *[You see? These members of the house believe in you,]* his father communed with a gentle smile. *[Now, son, you're going to perform your first ever official job as a member of the Ducal family. You're going to go back in there and smile and pretend that this conversation never happened,]* he ordered. *[We're not going to take away from your mother's special day. I haven't told anyone about this yet, and you will keep it to yourself until I announce it. Can you do that?]*

[I can do that,] he replied, his thought trying to be brave, but was betrayed by his nervousness and worry.

[Good. Now I hate to be rude, but I have a lot to think about, plans to make, work to do, and you know I do that kind of work best when I'm alone...or at least as alone as I can be,] he noted, pointing up over his head where the biggest wolf was leaning his head over them, looking down curiously. That made Rann laugh despite himself, and that laugh made his father give him a genuine, warm smile. *[You go back in before they miss you and relax. Everything is going to be alright.]* He was pulled into a gentle hug, and he clung to his father in concern and fear. But his powerful arms, the warmth of him, they did make him feel better. There was no way he could ever be hugged by his father and not feel *safe*.

[I love you, Daddy.]

[And I love you, Rann.]

The animals all moved to let him walk out, even the bugs, and he couldn't resist turning and looking over his shoulder as he walked towards the door back inside. The animals returned to cluster around his father, who had turned to put his hands back on the rail and look out over the water again. The little bird on his shoulder gave a little peeping chirp of encouragement, then took off and returned to its perch on his father's shoulder. Seeing the animals like that, it reminded him how special his father was, how *magical* he was, and why it always seemed like his father could do anything. If whatever it was he had to do was really that dangerous, well, who in the whole world could do it better than the Grand Duke Jason Karinne?

But as he reached the door, he looked at the sensor plate in it that would accept his gestalt command to open, and he realized something. Something had just *changed*. When he went inside, nothing would ever be the same again, even if Dad did come back. Dad would never treat him like a little boy again, and in a way, he wasn't that little boy anymore. He was old enough now to be trusted with real responsibility, real duty, and it had been a stark first lesson.

His father trusted him to do something very, very important, and he would not let his father down. Not now, not ever.

Rann Brian Fox Shaddale Karinne had just learned an important lesson about growing up.

Chapter 11

Raista, 35 Miraa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Saturday, 8 March 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Raista, 35 Miraa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Foxwood East, Karsa, Karis

He knew that this was going to be all but a rebellion, but he was ready.

He wasn't ready with facts, or logic, or reason, those didn't work on Aya. He was ready with *force*. Force, she could understand, even when she absolutely hated it when she was on the receiving end of it. He knew that her initial reaction was going to be nearly violent dissent, and she very well may attempt to physically stop him from going to the annex, and that was where the force came in. The corvette that would take him was already at the dock, and the tactical in the basement was on and ready. Further, he was going to tell her *outside*, where she couldn't order doors sealed to keep him in.

But the more serious talk was about to take place. Jyslin had recovered enough from her hangover to form rational thoughts and was taking a shower as he sat in his office and looked over the specs of the endolimbs that Rook had just finished about an hour ago. He'd built them out of armor-quality titanium, polarized shocked titanium laced with entangled threads of Telvestrium, a trick they'd learned from the *Syndicate* of all people. The Telvestrium strands would bend the metal back into shape if it was bent, and the strands themselves would get harder and harder the more they were bent from their forged "at rest" shape. Much like how IP got stronger by proportion to the energy used against it, those Telvestrium strands got stronger and stronger the more they were bent from their original position, and then that energy was released back into the metal to

return it to its original shape, like a spring returning to its shape after being stretched. Polarized shocked titanium itself was malleable, would bend before it broke, which paired it with Telvestrium strands very well...it just took a *hell* of a lot of force to bend shocked titanium. Add to that titanium's very light weight compared to other armor-quality metals, nearly as light as foamed iso-aluminum, and that made it the ideal metal to use for the endolimbs' endoskeletal frame. Within those dull silver metal "bones" were all the circuitry that both controlled the limb and made up the tactical gestalt. And Rook had even built weaponry into them, a Korgg tetryon wave weapon in each forearm and a small monomolecular blade that seated within the radius and would extend out of the back of the hand *Wolverine* style, just with a single blade instead of three that would extend out more or less between the middle and ring finger knuckles, using the carpal and metacarpal bones as anchors to hold the blade steady. Since the hand was also artificial and was built of armor-quality metal, that gave the blade enough of a sturdy anchor to extend from the hand instead of the forearm just behind the wrist, which was the case for most arm-seated monomolecular blades. The blade wouldn't pose much of a threat to a Benga, but that wasn't why Rook had included it. It was there to give him the ability to cut through a wall, cell door, or other obstacle if for some reason he couldn't cut through with his telekinetic power. It was meant to be more of a tool than a weapon, like a pocketknife. The real weapon was the wave emitter crystal, which Rook had cleverly built to act as one of the bones in his wrist, which would clear the carpal bones in his hand if he bent his hand sharply upward. That would rotate the crystal into alignment and allow it to fire. But, since the crystal couldn't extend out into the palm of his hand, the wave blast would instead blow the flesh off the base of his palm and damage the artificial muscle strands controlling his thumb. Because of that, it was not something he would use without good reason. He'd be crippling his hand's ability to grip things or pick them up by more or less destroying the muscles that would allow his thumb to bend in towards the palm. So, the wave weapons were literally a weapon of last resort, but weapons at his disposal if he felt he needed them.

The need to conceal the fact that his arms were cybernetic trumped making the equipment built into them practical from a usage point of view.

The tactical gestalt in the endolimbs would do the job. It was about 15 times more powerful than his interface gestalt, and that was enough power for him to perform some pretty impressive telekinetic feats. With that much power, he could manipulate light to generate a laser beam more than powerful enough to kill or burn through metal. He'd be able to generate enough Torsion to form a ball a good shakra across, where he could only create a pinpoint using his interface gestalt. So, from an *oh shit* point of view, he'd have weapons to use against the Benga guards in the Board's council chamber.

There was a little more to the system, and that was the neatly arrayed array of hair-like fibers extending from the base of the endolimb. Those were external strands that would be bonded to the remaining part of his upper arm bone to strengthen it, which would allow him to use his arms in ways that would snap his arm like a twig if he applied that mechanical leverage without his bones being reinforced. He would still have to be careful of tearing the muscles, ligaments, and tendons in his shoulders, but with the reinforcement of his arm bones, he'd be able to execute moves of leverage beyond human norms. And like Wolverine from the comic books, his arms would be all but unbreakable due to the endolimb forearms and hands and the reinforced humerus bones—well, his humerus could still be broken, but the infused lacing would hold the bones together like a splint and allow him to keep going...it would just be painful. Those strands were not made of titanium. Those strands were made of one of the rarest and most valuable metals known to science, *Abrallium*. Abrallium was an isotope of *metallic* argon, and it could only be formed in the intense, crushing pressures found at the centers of supermassive gas giants, gas giants *way* bigger than Jupiter in the Terra system, gas giants that would have become stars if conditions had been different when they were formed. Abrallium was actually a very light metal due to a low density (a bit of a paradox given it was forged in the unimaginable pressure of a gas giant's core), but was stronger than high-grade Carbidium, very nearly as strong as untempered Adamantium. It was this aspect of it, an armor-quality metal that would weigh less than the same volume of bone into which it would be infused, that made it the perfect choice. It wouldn't weigh Jason's arms down in any way yet would provide exceptional protection against breaking his arms. Abrallium existed as a metal at room temperature (it only needed to be forged in a gas giant, it was stable once it was extracted), and since it

was formed from a noble gas, it was chemically inert, would not rust or decay through chemical action by outside forces, and that made it ideal to use inside a living body. The hair-width strands would be laced both into and across the surface of his bones and then bonded to the bone using a process that caused the fibers to liquefy and then resolidify, like melting epoxy, pouring it into a crack, and then letting it harden. Bones weren't solid, they had pores in them, and it was through those void spaces in the pores that medical spiders would thread the Abrallium strands on the interior of his bones, drilling through the bone structure as necessary to run the strands all the way up to the end of the bone. When it was done, an X-ray would show his arm as having a multitude of very fine lines of metal running through the bone mass and over the surface, attached to the bone like glue, and even harder to remove, metal that was even lighter than the bone around it.

The carefully placed mass of hair-like fibers that almost appeared to be optical fiber that made up the Abrallium represented a truly staggering cost in money, time, and effort to extract the metallic argon in its raw state, refine it to purge out the impurities like metallic hydrogen and other elements, and then cast it into strands. They were literally putting about *sixty million credits* into his arms, just in the value of the Abrallium alone. That didn't even factor in the cost of the endolimbs, which were *not* cheap. Endolimbs were about three times more expensive than standard cybernetic replacements due to the use of artificial muscle strand technology and the much more involved construction process.

And when this was over, when (or if) he had his organic arms reattached, the reinforcing Abrallium would remain. Like Wolverine, once it was bonded onto his bones, it couldn't easily be removed. It would do him no harm to leave it in, so they would leave it in.

Odds were, Rook didn't make the entire endolimb frame out of Abrallium because the metal had something of a paradoxical physical quirk...the more of it there was, the less strong it became. It was a metal whose strength *decreased* when formed into larger structures due to how the argon was chained together in its complex molecular structure. The more structures present, the weaker the bonds between the atoms became, so Abrallium was only armor-quality metal when used in small quantities. If he'd made the entire arm out of Abrallium, the fine strands they'd made

would have far greater tensile strength than the endoskeletal frame to which it was connected. Because of that, Abrallium was only used in small-scale applications.

So, Rook was taking Jason's survival *very* seriously, and for that, Jason was very grateful. And in a way, given how much Rook had spent building the arms, it would almost be a crime to have them removed when the mission was over. Nobody else could use them due to the exacting fit, not unless they had arms the exact same size and length as Jason's, so if Jason had them replaced, they were effectively scrap. And that was a *fuckton* of money to waste for a single mission.

Jyslin strode into the office nude, with a towel over her hair and her arms up to scrub the water out of it, which gave him a very enticing view of her jiggling breasts. She looked a lot better now than she had when she woke up, no doubt because the anti-hangover medicine Songa gave her had kicked in, which throttled her headache and nausea. *[You wanted to talk to me, love?]* she asked, giving him a smile.

[Yes, and it's very serious...so you might want to put on a robe or something,] he answered. *[It sorta takes away from the gravity of the situation if I'm staring at your rack while telling you something this important.]*

She gave him an amused look, but it was tempered by both curiosity and a bit of trepidation, given how sober his thought was. She glanced to the side as she continued to dry her hair, and then her robe floated in through the open door, fetched from the bedroom. And that she could grab it with her power without seeing it and navigate it into the office without merging to a camera pod showed just how good she was getting with her telekinetic ability. She wrapped the towel around her hair, then shrugged into the robe and advanced forward to sit in the chair facing his desk.

[I haven't announced this to the house yet. So keep this quiet until I do,] he told her as he leaned forward and offered his hand to her. She leaned over the desk and took it, and in that touch was completely private and secure communion. In a fraction of a second, he imparted to her the plan, the entire plan, and that made her eyes go as wide as saucers.

[Jason! Are you out of your mind?] she demanded. [That's too dangerous!]

[I know it's dangerous. Now look me in the eye and tell me that there's another way to stop this war before it spirals out of control.]

She gave him a helpless look, a tear forming in her eye, then she looked away.

[Exactly. I'm not rushing into this, love. I fully understand just how dangerous it is, and that there's a very real chance I may fail. That I may not come back. But there's no other way. With the board on the absolute warpath, the only way to stop them from launching the fleet is to kill the Board before the fleets organize. And the only way to do that without shattering the entire political structure of the Syndicate is to get them to gather in one place so we can kill them and only them in one simultaneous attack. To do that, we need bait, bait so irresistible that they'll ignore the dangers the Oracles warn them about. Me. Even though it's so dangerous, love, I have to do this. I couldn't live with myself if I did nothing and then watched as millions and millions of people die. It would destroy me, and you know it would. We have a plan, and it's a good one. I have confidence in it. As long as I don't have bad luck, I can get to a nexus bridge. You just need to have faith in Miaari and Kraal, as much as I do. I have trusted my life to the Kimdori in the past, and I will trust my life to them now.]

She reached over and put her hand on his face. *[I'm afraid, love. I'm so afraid.]*

[So am I, but we can't let fear stop us from doing our duty,] he answered. [I am willing risk my life to save others. What I want, what I need, love, is permission to risk yours. I have no choice but to go, but I will go with a much lighter heart if I go with your blessing. If I die—] he broke off, a look of pain on his face as he looked away. [If I die, I know what could happen to you. It's the only thing that's making me doubt my decision. I know it's selfish of me to risk both of our lives, but I just can't see another way. Believe me, I don't want to do this. I have to do this, because nobody else can. For the house, for our friends in the Confederation, for the countless millions, billions of lives that will be wasted if this war escalates, I am willing to risk my life, put it all on the table to stop this war and save

those lives. The question is, Jyslin Shaddale Karinne, will you stand with me, knowing that we both may fall?]

She gave him a long, heartfelt look, then gave him a teary-eyed smile. [I would follow you into hell, Jason Karinne,] she communed with every bit of her love and devotion and loyalty and admiration. [Be it in this life or the next, we will always be together. I'm positive that after everything you've done for her children, Trelle will let you into her garden. If anyone who does not believe in Trelle has earned that right, it is you, Jason Karinne. I believe that with all my heart and soul.]

[We won't walk together for a while, Jyslin. If I die, you must live. Rann and the girls need you. The babies need you. Live long enough for them to remember their mother, to give them the childhood they deserve. Don't let them grow up and not remember you and teach them about their father in the way only you can. But, when they're grown, when they're ready, when they don't need you anymore, then, and only then, will I hold out my hand and call you home. Promise me, Jyslin. Promise me you won't give up on our babies until they are ready to go on without you. Promise me.]

She burst into tears and swiped her hand in front of her, causing his desk to nearly topple over as she moved it out of the way with her telekinesis, then she crushed him in a powerful embrace. [I can't live without you, but I can't deny you, Jason! I will give you that promise, if only because you're not asking me to live my entire life without you! When the babies are grown, when my task is done, I will come to you, Jason Karinne. I will find you. Be it in Trelle's garden or your God's heaven, we will find each other.]

[That's all I needed to hear,] he communed tenderly, running his hand up and down her back. [But let's not make the funeral arrangements yet. I know the risk, but I feel confident I can do this and get home alive. We have a good plan. Kraal has his claws deep in E Chaio. And with the tactical in the endolimbs and Mrar's help, I can learn what I need to know to stall long enough for the spiders to infect the Board and then get my ass out of there. And now I can do it without my worry for you and our children hanging over my head.] He put his forehead against her own, and they shared a moment of silence where no thought was exchanged, only the deep, boundless love they held for one another, reinforcing the unbreakable bonds

that entwined them together. *[Now, love, I have to go. Songa will start the procedure as soon as I get there. And as soon as I wake up, I'm going to start preparing for the mission. You do me a favor and meet me at the annex. I'll need to leave by myself, because of Aya.]*

Jyslin gave a weepy laugh. *[You haven't told her yet?]*

[Oh no, I want to do that outside and on the pier, like within shakra of the corvette's hatch. So, what I need you to do is be in here and ready to come to my rescue with a baseball bat in case she gets exotic.]

She gave him a brave grin. *[You're gonna get me in trouble.]*

[We're a team, remember? When I'm in trouble, you're in trouble.]

She had to laugh, and that made him lean over and give her a gentle kiss. *[That's what I wanted to hear. I'll see you at the annex when you get there.]*

[I'll be over as soon as I get dressed. I may beat you there.]

After putting his desk back where it belonged, he ambled out of the house with weighty thoughts, but more than anything, he was glad that Jyslin had seen reason. This affected her more than anyone one Karis, but even she could see the logic of it. She may hate it, but she could see that it *had* to be done. *Aya*, he called, walking out of the house and out onto the beach deck. *I have to go to the medical annex. I need to talk to you before I leave.*

And why do you need to go to the annex?

That's part of what I'll explain to you.

I'll have Dera and—

No. I'll go alone.

You will not go alone. The annex isn't a secure area.

Then you will come, you will come alone, and you will give me your solemn vow that you will not interfere.

Interfere with what?

I'll explain that to you on the way.

You want me to agree to something you won't even tell me about?

Take it or leave it, Jason sent firmly.

She reached the corvette just after him, giving him an unfriendly look as he stepped over and through the hatch. *You should be in armor.*

It would be pointless, he replied, moving back into the tactical area and telling the pilot to take off. He sat at one of the sensor stations as Aya stood in front of him, then he pointed at the chair of the other sensor station. When she sat down, he held out his bare hand expectantly. She gave him a suspicious look, then took off her gauntlet and took it. He then explained everything to her in that touch, in a way that the crew of the corvette couldn't hear, a process that only took seconds yet took considerably longer than it had with Jyslin. He could see the shock in her eyes as she realized just what it meant, but he could also see...*comprehension*. Did she understand enough not to throw a complete temper tantrum? *I don't like this. I don't want to do this. But I have to,* he stressed. *If I walk away from this chance to stop this war, I will never be able to live with myself. I'm willing to put my life on the line to save two galaxies from a war that might kill trillions. My life is nothing compared to all of theirs. But this isn't a suicide mission. I'll go in well-armed, excuse the pun, and with a plan. A very detailed plan. That plan will get me out alive and back home, Aya, as long as I'm well prepared. And I'm going to need you to get me ready,* he told her. *So, that's where it is. You can go completely off the rails and fight with me and lose, or you can accept that this is something you can't stop and do everything in your power to make sure I come home alive. That choice is yours.*

She gave him a long, searching look, her lip nearly twitching, then she blew out her breath. *Why must you always make me wish for retirement, Jason?* she complained. *I swear to Trelle, none of the other members of the Imperial Family are anywhere near as maddening as you.*

I told you when you first came here that I'd give you gray hair, Aya. I wasn't joking then, and nothing has changed. But look me in the eyes and tell me that you wouldn't do the same if you were in my place.

I would, she admitted immediately. *And if I weren't the captain of the guard sworn to protect you, I'd not say a word against you. But as the*

captain of your guard detachment, Jason, I am honor bound to try to stop you from this insanity. So, will you stop?

No.

Then I have done my duty, she sent, her thought vibrating with pride and admiration. She then reached over and put her gauntleted hand on his face. You are the most annoying, infuriating, frustrating, courageous, compassionate, decent man I have ever known, Jason Karinne. While I absolutely hate this plan, I cannot tell you how proud I am of you.

So, can I count on you?

If I can't stop you, then I'll do everything in my power to make sure you come home, she affirmed.

Well, that was easier than I expected, he smiled at her. I expected both of us to need some teeth put back in by the time we got to the annex.

She smiled slightly. If the stakes weren't so high, Jason, then I would beat you into submission, she told him. The impartial military commander in me can see that the plan is worth the risk. I just wish the risk wasn't you.

We can mitigate that risk with planning and preparation, he told her. And that's why I need you. I'm counting on you to help get me home, Aya, and with you helping me, I feel much more confident that that's exactly what's going to happen. I trust these hands with my life, he told her with powerful emotion, taking both her hands, one bare and one gloved, turning then palms up. And not just to protect me. You have guided me with your wisdom and helped train me to protect the people I love from the cockpit of a rig. I would not be the man I am today if not for you. With your help, Aya, I am confident that I will make it home. And to protect your perfect record, I'll disavow you just before I leave, he added cheekily. Can't have you going back to the palace with a black mark on your record.

She just had to give that voiceless, wheezing laugh. I'm never going back to the palace, Jason. When I retire, I'll stay here, and probably take up a position overseeing the training of the Ducal Guard to ensure the training regimen is up to our standards. I am an Imperial Guard, but even I understand that the secrets I carry require me to stay on Karis to protect them, for the rest of my days.

I'd be honored to have you, Aya. I'll build a nice compound on a tropical island and declare it an annex of the Pensioner's Wing, available for any active or retired Imperial Guard to come and sit on a beach and enjoy themselves. Even an Imperial Guard needs a vacation. It will be your place, a place just for the Imperial Guard, where not even us annoying members of the Imperial Family will be allowed to bug you. And to make sure you don't feel like you're slacking, we'll put a training barracks there for Ducal Guard recruits, where they can do their amphibious training, and perhaps some exomech or fighter training. But that'll depend on how big the island is that you pick. But no matter what, there will be 46 houses on that island that will belong to the detachment.

I think I'd like that, Jason, she told him. But you'd have to cede the land to the Imperial Guard the way you ceded Dahnai's island to her. It must be Imperial Guard sovereign territory, controlled by us and us alone.

Done and done, he smiled. While I'm having my arms chopped off, look over the map and find a suitable island, both for guard amphibious training and suitable vacation-worthy beaches, big enough for 46 houses plus extra beach for the vacationing guards. It'll belong to the Imperial Guard as soon as I sign the order. Since building a Ducal Guard training facility is official government business, I'll put Bunvar on it. She'll have it done inside a month, knowing her. Oh, and this is not a bribe, he winked. This is my thanks to you, to all of you, for everything you have done for me and the House of Karinne. We would not be who we are without you.

She gave him a smile, then leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

So, it was a very relieved Jason Karinne that came down the stairs of the corvette and onto the landing pad on top of the Karsa Medical Annex, where Songa and two other red-coated doctors were waiting for him. *Everything ready?* he asked as he reached them.

Anytime you are, dear, Songa replied, her thought still a bit bristling. *But Rook is making a few last-minute alterations to the units. He's adding something the Kimdori sent to him. He should have the units here and ready by the time we need them for the procedure. It will take us nearly two hours to reach the point where we need them.*

I'm almost afraid to ask.

He added some experimental shielding the Kimdori sent him to protect the units from ionic overload, she told him. The Syndicate has an ionic field technology they use to short out hidden weapons at security checkpoints, and plasma systems are vulnerable to it. The shielding is to protect from that device if they use it against you.

Oh. That's definitely something I want in them, he noted with a nod. Did Myleena get that info, so she can protect the spiders?

I wouldn't know that, dear, she answered.

I'll find out later. We need to get this going, I don't have much time. I want to be under when Zaa reveals the plan to the council, so I can avoid all their bullshit.

Aya followed him into the building and was right behind him as they took the elevator down to a floor more or less dedicated to the medical care of the Ducal family and other high-security VIPs. It was on this floor that Dahnai's family were kept in isolation and observation as the Generation virus infected them, and it was on this floor that Jason had had most every medical procedure they'd ever done to him. This floor also had Songa's office on it, so she was always close by; Songa was the primary doctor for Jason and his family, her right and privilege as the head of the Karinne branch of the Medical Service. Even though she was more or less in an administrative job, she still practiced medicine. The floor had four surgical theaters, and it was to one of those that he was led, brought into the prep room just off of the largest of them. He undressed as they got everything ready, then sat on the gurney when they brought it in and let Songa and the primary surgeon attach remote sensors to parts of his head and chest, backups in case the medical sensor unit in the surgical table malfunctioned during the operation. *[Zaa, I'm about to start the operation,]* Jason sent a quarter of the way across the galaxy, all the way to Zaa on Kimdori Prime. *[When does the council meeting start?]*

[In an hour, cousin,] she answered.

[Good, I'll be under when you tell them,] he noted with satisfaction shimmering in his thought. *[Songa told me that you sent some experimental shielding?]*

[Rook should be installing it now,] she answered. [My technical research children developed the shielding just this morning. It's a layer of physical material that will protect the plasma systems from the ionic field. Rook has to coat the endolimb units in the material, and he has to make sure that not even a pinhole of unprotected metal is exposed. The coating itself is highly durable, so it won't be rubbed off or damaged as you move the arms, at least long enough for you to accomplish the mission. My children estimate it will last nearly six months before it begins to break down. That is more than long enough.]

[Sounds good. It's been fully tested?]

[Yes. It offers complete protection,] she replied. [And it does not interfere with the SCM units in the endolimbs that will hide them from Syndicate sensors.]

[Good deal. They're wheeling me into the surgical theater, cousin, so I'll talk to you later.]

[I'll be there when you awaken, cousin. I'll have the initial material for the extraction plan with me for you to study.]

[Good deal. See you when I wake up, cousin. Bring the cubs and Denfather, stay for dinner.]

[We would enjoy that,] she replied.

He transferred to the table, then laid down as one of the nurses covered him with a thermal blanket. They put his arms on stands out of the sides, almost akin to the arms of the execution table for lethal injection and strapped them down. "As I stare down the maw of the dragon, I will shout my defiance even as the jaws snap shut," he muttered in French as he closed his eyes. "Don't damage them too much, I'll want them back when this is over," he added in Faey.

"We'll take good care of them, your Grace," the primary surgeon told him, a middle-aged Faey man who was surprisingly tall, his face and hair covered in surgical protective garb. "If you're ready."

"Do it," he said, closing his eyes. Seconds later, when the sleep inducer was activated, he tumbled into the dark, dreamless oblivion of induced sleep.

There was no way of knowing how long he was asleep, but he was clearly asleep long enough for things to get crazy.

He expected Zaa to be there when he woke up. He did *not* expect an absolute audience on the other side of the glass from his recovery room, and every single one of them was a member of the council. They were packed into the hallway outside his room three deep, the shortest in the front and the tallest in the rear, standing there watching him sleep—and then wake up. Most of them were here in person, with only those that couldn't survive on Karis without life support in bionoids. Jyslin and Dahnai were in the room with him, sitting side by side on chairs by the bed, and when he sat up and looked down, catching her attention and making Jyslin quickly set aside the handpanel she was reading and Dahnai leap to her feet, he got a look at the result of his decision.

Below his hospital gown extended arms made of metal. They were coated in that shielding material that almost looked like paint primer, dark gray and rough, and it looked like all the flesh had been stripped off of his arms and the bones sprayed with spray paint. Bandages covered his arms just below the elbow, because Songa had had to attach his organic muscles to the base of the endolimb unit, which extended past his elbow and replaced the lower section of his humerus bone. The bones at the joints were connected with hair fiber wire, almost invisible to the naked eye yet stronger than steel, each metal “bone” of the endolimb cast to perfectly resemble the real bones that had been attached to him before he went to sleep. The two endolimbs had slender braces running from the flesh of his upper arm all the way down to keep them from flopping around aimlessly if he moved. There was no musculature attached to the endolimbs, that step would come later, so he had no way to move them. In that respect, they were much different than standard endolimbs, which had artificial muscles and filler synthetic tissue already incorporated into them. But the need to keep them hidden had made Rook build something much different from a standard endolimb.

But they were active. He could sense the biogenics in them, turned on and functional, and they reported to him when he queried them, to get an understanding of what was built into them. The tactical was online and

already imprinted to him, working the same way as a passively merged gestalt, which was only smart. An imprinted gestalt could amplify his power far more than a generic tactical gestalt, which meant that he could squeeze every iota of power possible out of the gestalt in the arms. The tetrayon wave weapons had been removed—Rook hadn't told him about that—and one more amplifier stack had been added in their place, one in each arm.

It made sense. Zaa said that the entire endolimb had to be covered with the shielding for it to work, and the emitter crystal of the wave weapon couldn't be covered, or it couldn't fire. That would have left a gap in the shielding that would have made it useless, so Rook had to remove the wave weapons. But the monomolecular blades were still in there, he must have found a way to protect the housing unit for the blades.

And that was it. Outside of the usual endolimb control circuitry that would allow the limbs to translate his nerve impulses into movement commands, the power supply system, the SCM module that would hide the endolimbs from Syndicate scanners, and the monomolecular blade systems, that was all there was in each unit. Rook had stripped them bare to give as much space as possible for the tactical, and that was the smart thing to do. The tactical was his weapon, and Rook had made it as powerful as he possibly could. The artificial muscles Songa would add later would give his forearms and hands superhuman strength—and would run on his own body's bio-electricity, so they didn't need to be connected to artificial power—and then the whole thing would be covered with living flesh to conceal the fact that his arms were artificial.

There was one thing he saw in how Rook had designed them. The units had no limiter, Rook couldn't add in the limiter system since it was outside of the "bones" of the endolimb, and the shielding prevented him from installing it in the interior due to the need for the shielding to completely cover the bones to work properly. He would have complete access to the full strength of the artificial muscles at all times, and that would mean that he'd have to be very, very careful else he might accidentally break things or hurt someone. That, or Songa would implant artificial muscles that weren't unnaturally strong.

They were all staring at him. He looked at them with a calm, steady expression, then Dahnai nearly knocked him off the bed as she crashed into him, giving him a powerful hug. *Are you insane? You have to be insane!* she accused, sending openly. *I forbid this! No! No no no no no!*

“Zaa explained everything, Dahnai,” he said aloud as the others started to file into the room. “This is our best chance to stop this war before it escalates, and I will not turn my back on others when they need me. My life is not worth the *billions* that will be lost if this war gets out of control,” he said adamantly as she pulled back enough to look him in the eyes.

“Yes it is!” she nearly screamed. “Your life is worth a thousand worlds, Jason Karinne! It is worth *everything* to me!”

“Later,” he told her, staring her in the eyes, then used his telekinesis to gently push her back...he had to, since he couldn’t move his arms. “I didn’t expect an audience when I woke up,” he said as the others continued to file into the room.

“We had to come in person, Jason,” Krirara told him, her voice rippling with emotion. “To tell you how insane and incredibly brave you are.”

“Truth,” Shakizarr said, looking down at him, his expression fierce. “You are a man of unmatched honor and courage, Jason Karinne. Your name will be inscribed on Delivarr’s Monument by my own hand.”

“Don’t memorialize me yet, Shakizarr. I have no intention of dying,” he replied evenly. “We have a plan to get me out of there, and if I didn’t think it would work, I wouldn’t have been anywhere near as willing to do this. Yes, I know it’s dangerous. But as I just told Dahnai, I feel it is worth the risk. If I can stop this war by putting my own neck on the line, then that is exactly what I’m going to do,” he said with simple dignity. “How did it go, Songa?”

“The procedure was a success, Jason. Can you access the endolimb units?”

“They’re both operational,” he replied. “They’re reporting full functionality. The tactical is up and already imprinted. When’s the next step?”

“Within the hour,” she replied, “We need to let the swelling around the attachment point subside before we begin the procedure for the muscle attachment and the first stages of bio-growth, primarily the cartilage in the joints, the lymphatic, vascular, and nervous systems that service the cartilage and the tissue between the radius and ulna, and the lining covering the bones. Some of that will be beneath the muscles, so it has to be done first. Jason, to further conceal the true nature of the endolimb units, we are *not* putting in artificial muscles, since Rook can’t install a limiter system,” she warned. “The arms would pose more of a threat to you than to the Syndicate with you having, in effect, superhuman strength in your hands. We’ll be using your own muscle tissue. In effect, dear, the only thing we’re replacing are the bones themselves. Everything else will be organic, which will further conceal the fact that you have endolimbs.”

“Alright. I noticed that there was no limiter in the arms, and now I know why.” He looked towards the assembled council members. “Has Zaa presented a hard timeline to you yet?”

“Not yet, cousin, we need more information from Kraal’s operatives,” Zaa answered, as he tried to ignore Dahnai’s incredibly intense gaze. He knew that face. She had a lot to say to him, and she was just waiting to get him alone so she didn’t look undignified as she screeched like a howler monkey. “But we have time. It will take the Syndicate sixteen days to completely mobilize their fleets for the jump to our galaxy.”

“Then I made the right decision starting this now,” he said, looking down at his artificial arms. “Now, since there’s enough of us here to discuss the matter, and I have a little time before I’m put back on the operating table,” he said, leaning back after Songa raised the head of the bed, “I’m going to assume that you’ve accepted our plan.”

“We haven’t officially voted on it yet,” Krirara told him. “We wanted to discuss this with you before we made that decision.”

“From a purely military standpoint, the plan has the potential to succeed,” Grran said, and the fact that he spoke meant he was here in a bionoid. “The Board will not expect a galactic ruler to put himself at risk, and they don’t know what you can do,” he said, pointing at his artificial arms. “But the biggest question remains, Jason Karinne. Why?”

“That’s what I want to know!” Dahnai barked angrily. “Why are you doing this, Jason? Why are you risking your life like this?”

“Simple. Because someone has to,” he replied. “And I’m the most qualified person for the mission. Zaa told you, they won’t be dissuaded. We made a major mistake in our operation and went beyond any hope to negotiate with them, and now this is our only option. And since *I’m* the one that made that mistake, it’s my responsibility to fix this. It was my plan that put us in this mess, and we made the almost inexcusable mistake of carrying it out before we learned more about Benga culture and society. I will not force another to pay for the mistakes I have made,” he said strongly.

“This is not some ridiculous act of penance, Jason Karinne!” Dahnai snarled.

“I know that. But like I said, we have a chance here, and I’m the best option, not just to accomplish the mission, but to get home alive. The Syndicate has no idea who the Generations are, or what they can do, and Zaa has a good plan to get me out of there and back home in one piece. Name another member of the council that can walk into that room and get out of it alive, Dahnai,” he challenged, giving her a steady look.

“There are over three hundred of you!” she nearly screamed. “Send someone else!”

“If you think for one second that I would ever do that, Dahnai Merrane, then you have no fucking idea who I am,” he replied, almost coldly, and his tone nearly made her flinch. “I would *never* send someone else to do what I can do better, just to save my own skin. My job is to protect *them*, not have them protect *me*. And if *this* is what I have to do to protect the Confederation and save billions of lives,” he said, lifting his artificial arms by his shoulders, “then that is exactly what I will do.”

She gave him a look on the verge of tears, trying to come up with some way to counter that argument.

His words had produced a weighty silence among the other members of the council in the room, as they all stared at him. “Like I said, Zaa, Miaari, and Kraal have a plan to get me home, and I think it’s a good one. Good enough to take this risk,” he said in a reasonable tone. “This isn’t a suicide

mission, it's just a mission with what I feel is an acceptable amount of risk. And it's that simple. There's really nothing else to talk about. And the sooner the council agrees to it, the sooner we can arrange a face to face meeting with the Board."

"You're overlooking the Oracles," Alros of the Rathii said, his long, pointed ears bobbing a bit as he moved his head.

"We have a plan to deal with the Oracles," Jason said confidently. "We know how their power works, and just like with the attack on Atrovot, we can use that power against them. They'll see a danger in the Board meeting with us face to face, and that's why I'm the one that has to go. I'm the one that ordered their manors blown up, which was the cardinal sin in Benga society, and Kraal fed them my name so they know I'm the one that did it. So when they hear my name as the one that's coming to negotiate, their base nature will override their caution. They'll want to watch me die personally," he said dryly. "So, they'll accept the meeting despite the Oracles warning them there's a danger in it. And remember, all I have to do is get in the same room with them. Really, I just need to get inside the room, whether they're there or not. I'll be carrying in medical spiders that have been programmed to invade their bodies and then kill them on command, and *they* will be what does the deed. So, the Board doesn't even have to be there in person. The spiders will infect them the next time they come into the room. Because the Oracles won't see me as the *immediate* danger, since I am not going into that room with the *intent* to kill the Board, the Board will be much more willing to ignore the danger the Oracles will warn I pose. I will only fight if they force me to fight. My job is just to walk into the room, talk to them, and then walk out. The Oracles will see me as a *potential* danger, a danger that only manifests if the Board makes the wrong choice of attacking me, and we're certain that the desire of the Board to exact their revenge on me will make them ignore that danger."

"I had no idea you could manipulate the Oracles' predictions that way," Sk'Vrae mused.

"Like I said, we know how their power works. And truth be told, it's not really all that intimidating when you learn how to get around it," he said dryly. "Since the Consortium never found out about the Oracles, they were vulnerable to their predictions. We don't have that same handicap."

“Alright, I’ll accede that it sounds like you have a good plan, Jason,” Magran told him. “Now what about your escape plan?”

“Simple. The Syndicate has no idea what a nexus bridge is,” he answered. “Kraal will have multiple beacons in place close to the capitol building, to where I can get to one within minutes of getting out of the building. I can just warp space to protect myself as I walk right out of the building, right to the beacon, and then escape. They have no idea how to get past spatial warping, so I should be safe enough.”

“That...will work,” Shakizarr said thoughtfully. “You’re right. They have no idea what a beacon is, they won’t understand the reality of it until you walk through the nexus portal. And you can defend yourself to reach it, the same way your Generations protect your battleships, by warping space to turn away all attacks.”

“Precisely. There’s much more to the escape plan, multiple contingency plans in case I can’t reach the primary extraction point, but it boils down to that. I can reach the beacon within minutes of starting my escape, and get there safely thanks to this tactical,” he said, raising his arms again. “With it, I can warp enough space to protect an entire dropship. We have a plan, friends, and it’s a good one.”

“And you’re sure you can get the tactical past their scanners?” Gau asked, who was standing at the back of the gathering due to his great size.

“We already know that Kimdori SCM defeats Syndicate sensors, and these units have SCM built into them. We’ve already tested it in the field using infiltrator bionoids, so we’re absolutely positive that they won’t be able to detect them. To their scanners, my arms will appear to be entirely natural. And since they’ll be covered in my own flesh, they’ll *look* entirely natural.”

“Jason speaks truth,” Zaa agreed. “We are absolutely certain that their sensor technology cannot defeat our SCM. The modules in those units will cause his arms to appear to be natural to Syndicate sensors. We have tested this extensively and have confirmed proof through the use of infiltrator bionoids on E Chaio.”

“Well...if he can get a tactical in there, then I’m fairly sure he can get out alive,” Grayhawk said thoughtfully. “This plan is somewhat crazy and

more than a little desperate...but I think it will work. And what matters most is that I agree, Jason has a very, very strong chance of a safe return. There is risk, there is definite risk, but a good plan can mitigate risk.”

“Exactly, Grayhawk,” Jason nodded. “I know this is dangerous, but I sincerely believe that the plan we have is solid, and it will work. We just have to have faith in the Denmother and the best of her children. They have never let me down, and they won’t let me down in this.” He looked Dahnai in the eyes. “So, I’m not being crazy, love, and I’m not being suicidal. We have a plan. It’s a bit daring, but it’s a good one, and we have a plan to get me home. I have every intention of coming back alive. And not even you can deny that I am the best choice for this plan. I’m the only one among us that can carry in a powerful weapon they can’t detect and they can’t counter, and if comes down to a fight, I can use that weapon to get my ass out of there and to the nearest beacon. And in a way, it has to be me to do this, because I am the one member of the council the Board would most love to get in front of them, so they can get back at me for what I did to them.”

She looked absolutely defiant but said nothing.

“I may be inclined to approve this plan, despite my misgivings about your welfare, Jason,” Sovial said, the short Jirunji crossing her arms before her. “But only because you are so certain that you can accomplish it and get home safely.”

“Well I’m not,” Kreel said steadily. “Good plan or not, no way am I ever voting to send my best friend into a potential death trap. Just on the principle of the matter.”

“Yes! Thank you, Kreel!” Dahnai said loudly.

“Not saying you can’t do it, Jayce,” he said with a quirky smile. “Just not gonna vote for it.”

“I won’t vote for it either,” Krirara declared. “For the same reason. No matter how logical your plan is, Jason, I’m not sending my dear friend on a mission that may kill him.”

“This is the time to put practicality above sentimentality, Krirara,” Jason told her evenly. “We won’t get another chance at this. And *this* should tell you how serious I am about it,” he stressed, shrugging his shoulders to draw

attention to the fact that he'd had his arms surgically removed. "If you're only voting no because you're afraid I may get hurt, you're voting no for the wrong reason."

"So *you* say!" Dahnai said, her voice almost outraged. "Does the fact that we love you mean anything at all to you?"

"I do this *because* I love you, Dahnai Merrane," he replied calmly, looking at her. "And you, Krirara. And God help me, you too, Kreel. And all of you. I love the people of the Confederation, I love the rulers I've come to know in my time on the council, I love the wonderful people I have met from all of your different worlds, and above all, I love peace. I will protect you as I protect my own house, my own family," he declared adamantly. "If it brings peace, if it prevents untold death and destruction and misery, then I will do what must be done."

That silenced the entire room. They all looked at him with varying expressions, from surprise to pride to anguish to suspicion, and Songa took that pause to take control of the room. "With all due respect to you, august rulers, I must ask you to leave the room. We must prepare him for the next phase of the procedure," she called loudly. "The Grand Duke will be available for further discussions later." She looked over at Dahnai and Jyslin. "I'm afraid you two as well, my friends," she said gently. "You can come back when he's finished with the next procedure."

"Alright, Songa," Jyslin said as she stood up, and the others started quietly filing out of the room.

Dahnai gave him a dark scowl, then she turned and stormed from the room, pushing a few other rulers out of her way.

[She'll calm down,] Jyslin assured him, her hand on his face to prevent eavesdropping. *[I'll talk to her, though she's pretty mad at me for not being as opposed to this as she is.]*

[You are opposed to this; you just see reason.]

[Exactly, love. But you know that 'Empress' and 'reason' don't usually go together.]

He had to grin at her. *[That's why you're my wife instead of her. You're clearly the smarter one.]*

[I'm going to tell her you said that,] she threatened with a smile.

[Go ahead, how much madder can she get?] he challenged, which made her return concern-tinged mirth. She leaned down and gave him a gentle, loving kiss on the forehead, then she stood up and followed the others out of the room. Thanks, dear, he told Songa with a smile up at her.

I wasn't helping you out, dear, you need to prep for the next operation, she answered brusquely, her disapproval still writhing beneath her thought. The swelling has gone down to acceptable levels, and we have to begin the bio-growth and muscle implantation procedure as soon as we can.

How did you clone the muscles so quickly?

We didn't. We cloned some flesh for certain parts of the arm and the lining that covers the outside of the bones that needs to be there for your tendons to be able to attach to the endoframe, but we're using the musculature of your original arms for this. They've already been medically dissected and prepared for the procedure, muscle, tissue, and your skin. In effect, we're transplanting most of your old arms onto your new bones. We had to make a few adjustments since the endoframe isn't actual bone, particularly in the lining that covers the bone called the periosteum, but in effect, we're simply replacing your organic bones with metal ones. About 92% of the flesh and soft tissue will be your original arms, with the cloned tissue making up the final 8%.

Oh. Whoa. I hope I can move them by the time I have to go.

It's not going to be pleasant, dear, but you should regain full use of your hands and arms within eight days of the completion of the procedure. The medical spiders we're going to inject into the arms will do a great deal of the work to mend the post-surgical damage and fully anchor your muscles to the new bones, combined with the heavy use of bio-accelerant. That fast recovery will be mostly thanks to the medical spiders, they will in effect cause you to heal at ten times your normal rate as they repair the damage and return your arms to a healthy state. What would have taken you two months to heal naturally will only take eight days, thanks to the spiders. And the next step isn't going to be fun for either of us. My transplant specialist is budgeting thirty hours for muscular implantation procedure.

It's going to take us that long to implant the flesh and muscle on the new bones.

Ouch. So, there's more or less no going back, he reasoned. You're cannibalizing my old arms to build my new ones, so I really won't have the old ones anymore, just two sets of bones stripped of all their flesh. Or more to the point, my old ones will be my new ones. He was quiet a moment. Do me a favor and keep the bones. Clean them up and put them in a display case.

Why should I ever do something like that?

Because I want to put them on the shelf in my office to remind me that to be the Grand Duke the house deserves, I have to be willing to sacrifice, he replied soberly.

I'll have it done, she told him stoically. We need to prep you for the next surgery. It will be long, but it will be the last one. When you wake up, you'll have full and complete arms. You just won't be able to move them for a few days, as the spiders inside finish the work.

Sounds good. Let's get this show on the road, Doc.

The next time he woke up, which had to be a day later given how long Songa said the surgery was going to take, he didn't feel like a battered *Terminator* unit. His arms were wrapped in bandages, and what was more important, he could *feel* them....and boy, did he not like what he was feeling. His arms from the elbow down felt like he'd been stung by a million fire ants that had burrowed into his flesh, a great deal of pain that wasn't overwhelming, but was definitely seriously fucking unpleasant. Songa was leaning over him, looking down at him as he opened his eyes, a gentle smile on her face as she put away her disapproval of what he intended to do and was a doctor to her patient. *Don't try to move, you're on a paralytic agent to keep you motionless from the neck down. How do you feel, Jason?*

Like my arms have acid in my blood vessels instead of blood. So I definitely have feeling in them, he answered. Yeah, can you turn on the pain inhibitor?

I did. What you're feeling is what the inhibitor can't stop, she answered. It would be much worse if we turn it off.

Yeah, don't do that, he replied dryly.

Hold on a second, dear, I'll administer a painkiller. That should take the edge off, but it's not going to completely get rid of it.

Taking the edge off is enough, he nodded. Where are Jyslin and Dahnai?

Asleep, she replied.

How long was I under?

A shade under 26 hours, dear. Add that to the first surgery, and it's been over three full days since you were first put under.

Holy shit, seriously?

She nodded. The removal and attachment procedure took nearly fifteen hours. You recovered under induced sleep for twelve hours, then we woke you up and let you talk to the council and Dahnai. Then we completed the procedure. Which was a complete success, by the way. It took nearly 26 hours of continual surgery, but we've implanted the flesh and soft tissue, attached the muscles, nerves, blood vessels, and lymphatic ducts, and covered it all with your skin. Your arms are completely functional, or at least they will be once the spiders complete the repairs from the inside. For the next four days, dear, you'll be under a paralytic agent to keep you from even so much as flexing a muscle in your arms to give the spiders the time to finish the process. Right now, most of the flesh and tissue in your arms are barely anchored to anything, and a sharp tug or twist could severely damage your arm. That's why we have you paralyzed, and you'll have to stay this way for at least 68 hours to give the spiders time to stitch everything together enough for you to move. Jyslin and Dahnai are at your house, sleeping, it's 05:23, dear. After I threw them out of the annex, she added dryly. We woke you up so you can merge to a bionoid, that way you're not stuck in this bed. We have a bionoid here in the room for you to test your ability to merge, dear, and it's active. You should be able to locate it.

He closed his eyes and reached out and did indeed sense the biogenic computer that was his bionoid within the room with him. *I have it. Just a second, hon.* He reached out to the bionoid and merged to it. He settled into the merge, opening the bionoid's eyes as the sensor mesh and other sensory feeds stabilized to find himself sitting in the chair by the bed, wearing a Paladins tee shirt and jeans. "I'm merged," he said aloud, sitting up and looking at himself. The bionoid was sitting on the opposite side of the bed from Songa, who was looking over at him from where she was leaning over him. He stood up and looked down at himself, covered in a thermal blanket from the stomach down and his expression blank, nearly serene as he fully merged to the bionoid, which was a trick that would let him ignore the pain the inhibitor and the painkillers couldn't stop. His arms were encased in a plastic-like material, most likely to protect them from any kind of jarring or impact, and the casings were literally strapped to the bed at his sides to further immobilize them. He was also strapped just under his shoulders and across his chest to completely pin him down. The plastic casings around his arms were clear, revealing that the arms beneath were wrapped in bandages, which were clearly saturated in bio-accelerant. But under those bandages, Jason could sense through his own mind *millions* of medical spiders doing their work, literally connecting everything together inside his arms.

"Well, at least you didn't shave my head," he noted dryly, which made Songa snap a look at him.

She actually laughed. "We remember what you did to Meya and Myra after they had Ayama sabotage your tanning bed," she said. "I don't think anyone would dare anything like that again."

"Painful lessons stick," he said shamelessly. "Whatever you did to ease the pain, it's working enough for me not to feel anything while merged."

"Good. Do you feel stable?"

"More than," he replied. "I'm good for extended merge time, if you're releasing me to go home."

"That's the idea, dear. There's really not much you can do, and it would probably be best for your recovery to let your body heal while you take care of things in a bionoid. Just put that one back in the chair, dear. Your home

bionoid is still there. This is your office bionoid, and we want to keep it here in case we need you to merge to it here,” she replied.

“Alright. Just let me know if you need me to delink.”

“We will, dear.”

He sat the bionoid back in the chair, delinked, then reached through the biogenic network and located his home bionoid, down in his workshop. He again underwent the sensory distortion as he settled into the merge, as his vision and hearing and touch came into focus, then he stepped out of the alcove in the back of the workshop where his bionoid was kept when not in use. This was his oldest bionoid, but it was packed with all kinds of systems that he tested and basically just played with when he had the time. It had been upgraded many times, but the core biogenic processor was the same one, so in a way, Jason and this particular bionoid worked very well together, and that would help him ignore the pain in his real body by shunting off the sensation in favor of the bionoid’s sensory stream. It was the most experienced and developed of his six bionoids, had more lattice pathways in its crystal than any other, representing everything the master processor had learned as Jason controlled it. As a result, the bionoid was capable of more complex tasks than most bionoids, having learned how to do them over the months, and Jason left it active and in autonomous mode almost all the time so it could keep the workshop tidy and monitor some experiments he had running down here. And like almost all biogenic chips as complex as an RK-class master processor, it was programmed to be curious, to want to learn. The processor wasn’t alive, it hadn’t become self-aware like Rook’s chip had, but the chip was complex and powerful enough to start to develop a very, very basic personality imprinted from Jason’s own, mimicking its driver. They’d come to learn that it wasn’t unusual for bionoids who were hard coded to merge to only one person to start to imprint the driver’s base mannerisms, which influenced its actions when in autonomous mode. A bionoid right off the factory line would do things much differently than a bionoid that had been active long enough to develop lattice pathways, and like Jason’s bionoid, they learned enough to be capable of tasks beyond a “clean slate” bionoid. As such, the processor in Jason’s bionoid was hard-working, curious, caring, a touch adventurous, and maybe a tiny bit mischievous when in autonomous mode.

[Jyslin, I'm awake,] he communed from the bionoid's chip to her. *[I'm merged to the house bionoid and I'm coming up.]* When he got no response, he checked with the house's computer and found she was still asleep. Everyone was asleep for that matter, and it reminded him again just how early it was. Nobody would be awake for two hours. But, after three days of being unconscious, he wasn't about to go to sleep himself, so he sat down at his desk in the workshop and started clearing three days' worth of paperwork from his inbox. That had alerted Chirk that he was awake—that damn Kizzik never seemed to sleep—and she was in the office, so a flat hologram of her appeared in front of the desk. “*Revered Hive-leader,*” her interface called with a nod of her diamond-shaped head. “*It is good to see you well.*”

“The real me is laid up in the hospital, Chirk. This is a bionoid,” he said, motioning at himself. “But I think you knew that.”

“*Naturally. The top items in the inbox are decisions made by Cybi or cabinet members that were made under their authority when you are indisposed or otherwise unable to perform your duties, for your review. The second-tier items are high priority items which have not yet received attention from anyone.*”

“Sounds good. Any word from the council about negotiating with the Board while I was under?”

She shook her head. “*I have not received any information. However, Cybi might have a more accurate answer for you.*”

“So, I take it nothing huge happened while I was laid up?”

“*Nothing so dire that your cabinet could not handle it, revered Hive-leader,*” she affirmed.

“Alright, I'll get to work on this. Send me anything new. Oh, and send a message to Jaxtra that I'm awake and available for when Miaari wakes up. We have a lot to talk about.”

“*Yes, revered Hive-leader.*”

Her hologram winked out, and Jason called for Cybi as he started looking over the list. She manifested a hologram using the workshop's

emitters, hovering beside his desk in her no-legs form. *[I was just about to talk to you, Jason.]*

[Any word on the conference?]

[Actually, yes. The Board has agreed to a face to face meeting on E Chaio, as you predicted they would.]

[It was Kraal making that prediction more than me,] he corrected.
[When?]

[Twelve days,] she answered.

Twelve days...that would put it on 14 Romaa, and that should give him enough time to be ready. He could take some lessons from Mrar as he was now, but he couldn't practice what she taught until his arms healed, due to the cardiovascular stress it would put on him. It might rupture the delicate blood vessels in his rebuilt arms if he practiced before the spiders fully repaired everything. That should be enough time for Miaari and Kraal to have a detailed plan that would be both efficient and effective, with plenty of contingency plans to cover any eventuality, so he always knew what to do next no matter how many times he was thwarted from his goal. In both respects, that was more than enough time.

[Kraal was right. They want to watch me beg for mercy personally,] he mused darkly.

[Maybe not quite, Jason. Kraal reports there is significant suspicion among the Board that you are willing to come alone. They smell a trap, a fact backed up by the Oracles they have questioned about the event. They are aware of the potential danger.]

[But they're going through with it anyway,] Jason noted.

[What you should consider is that you are the one walking into the trap. If your goal is to get face to face with them, then perhaps that is the one thing they won't allow. They may be holograms or may send flunkies to the conference instead of coming themselves.]

[You overlook the simple fact that my only objective is to get inside the Board's meeting room,] he reminded her. *[As long as that's where I end up, I don't care if they're there or not.]*

[When do I overlook anything, Jason?] she asked lightly. [If they pose the right question to the Oracles, they could shoot this entire plan down.]

[And that's where we gamble,] he told her. [They'd have to specifically put the question to the Oracles of if I am a direct threat, not if meeting with me has a good or bad outcome. The danger the Oracles warn them about may sound to them that they will only be in danger if they make the wrong decision, which covers a lot of diplomatic situations. The gamble is that I'm betting that they're petty and vindictive enough to risk the danger to watch me suffer. And given what I know of Benga psychology, that is a good bet.]

[We can all hope so,] she replied.

[Now let's take a look at how you did being regent while I was under,] he smiled over at her. [So get ready for two hours of bitching and condescending sighs as I read over your decisions.]

She slapped him on the shoulder with her holographic hand, a move that made contact since she'd formed a hard hologram, and that made him chuckle.

Truth be told, Cybi's decisions were exactly what he would have done, but to be fair, they weren't all that difficult. They were routine paperwork, and the only serious decision she made as regent for the last three days was determining the size of a nature preserve on Hirga before the region was terraformed, so its boundaries were clearly defined before the terraformers moved through. And Cybi made that decision by consulting with Secretary Lirren of Interior and researching past nature preserve formations in determining the size of the new one. And Jason found nothing wrong at all with her decision, since it was made with advisement from experts and research. She'd deferred all external diplomatic decisions to him, and he didn't have a problem with that either, because she didn't feel comfortable making a decision like that when he was going to reclaim his powers as the Grand Duke when he woke up. But all in all, he was quite satisfied with Cybi's handling of his duties while he was in hospital, and it made him even more confident that she could do the job if he didn't make it back.

Kraal was right yet again. Cybi was the best choice for regent if something happened to him.

Cybi's hologram was replaced by her bionoid when it arrived from her facility, and they talked long enough for the house to start waking up. Ayama and Surin woke up to tend to Sanjira, then they must have decided to stay up and get things going. Ayama was cooking when he came up the stairs and into the kitchen, Surin playing with Sanjira, who was in a crib by the island. Amber was sitting on the island counter with an expectant look on her little face, her two tails wagging in a hypnotic pattern as she waited for breakfast. "I'm home," he declared, which made them all look towards him, even Sanjira. Amber gave him a curious look, then went back to staring at the stove. She knew what a bionoid was, and unlike Twilight, she didn't treat him any differently when he was merged to it...though it seemed she couldn't understand him quite as well when he was a bionoid. With Twilight, he had to assure her it was him for her to approach when he was using the bionoid, since she couldn't sense anything from it. Usually all it took to do that was to call out to her, since she knew his voice. As if thinking about her made her appear, Twilight jumped up onto the counter and sat down by the smaller vulpar, then leaned over and started licking the side of her head and neck, grooming her. Twilight all but considered Amber one of her kittens, and Amber was too much of a primadonna to not lap up that attention.

Twilight still had maternal impulses even though her kittens were weaned and living elsewhere. They'd been promised to Sirri and Maer, but they didn't like the way Twilight's kittens looked. They wanted tabi kittens that looked *cooler* than Twilight's kittens, so they'd went and gotten their own from Prakka. But that was no problem, given how popular tabis were on Karis. Jason had no problem finding the kittens a new home. Once the kittens were weaned and ready to leave, Jason had given them to Vella for her son and daughter. And like just about any child that had a tabi, the kids were absolutely smitten with their pets.

When both of them were silent a moment, probably trying to send to him, Ayama turned fully to look at him. "How are you feeling, Jason?" she asked.

"I woke up a bit ago and Songa cleared me to merge," he replied. "So right now, I'm not feeling much of anything. Between the pain inhibitor and the painkiller meds, I'm pretty out of it. Or at least my body is. I'm feeling a bit of it through the merge. When did Jys and Dahnai get back last night?"

“Late. This morning would be more correct,” Surin answered. “I doubt they’ll be up for a while. How did the procedure go?”

“I’m in recovery, Songa said it was a success. They transplanted my old arms onto new bones,” he said, almost reflexively looking down at his arm as he raised it and clenched his hand into a fist. “From what she said, they more or less just stapled everything in place to allow the medical spiders to do the actual sewing together. So I guess it’s accurate to say that the procedure won’t be over until the spiders are done.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, I could feel it before I merged, like a million ants crawling around inside my flesh,” he said, which made Ayama shudder a bit. “They have my body completely paralyzed so I can’t move, so nothing gets jarred out of place before the spiders finish.”

The door to the deck opened, and both Miaari and Kraal came in. “Cousin,” Miaari called. “Songa didn’t tell us you were awake.”

“I was only awake for like ten minutes before I had Cybi call you,” he answered. “You have enough to start training me?”

“Yes, cousin,” Kraal answered.

“Then let’s go up to my office. Ayama, can you make an early breakfast for them and send it up, please?”

“Of course,” she replied.

They had a lot prepared for him. They had images of the area around the capitol building, its grounds, the surrounding streets and plazas, and even maps of the underground tunnels around the compound. Kraal presented a seriously detailed plan that went step by step from execution to completion, taking into account the fact that it might start anywhere in the compound... anywhere on *E Chaio*. If his dropship was shot down on approach, he might end up anywhere, and Kraal was planning for that. Kraal was planning for *everything*, but that was what made him a Handservant of the Denmother.

They were up there long enough for the kids to go to school without ever seeing him—without even knowing he was awake—and for Dahnai and Jyslin to wake up. And Dahnai announced herself by pounding on the

locked door to his study without warning. *[You open this Trelle-damned door right now, Jason Karinne!]* she raged through commune.

“Dahnai,” he said evenly to the two Kimdori. *[Why? So you can scream and yell and throw things without listening to a single word I say?]* he retorted. *[If that’s all you want to do, go over to Joint Base Alpha and shoot targets on the range. But if you want to have a rational discussion, I’ll consider it after I’m done with this.]*

[And what the fuck is more important than us, Jason? You’re my amu dorai! I love you!]

[My survival,] he replied bluntly. *[Miaari and Kraal are here training me on the escape plan. Now, if you want to interrupt that, then I’m not sure what to say to you.]*

There was a startled silence. *[You tell me the minute you’re done,]* she nearly seethed.

“Sorry, she’s a bit...miffed,” he said quietly as she stormed away from the door.

“She has reason to be,” Miaari said. “She’s not used to facing loss in her personal life, Jason. So give her a little latitude.”

“True,” he agreed after a moment’s thought.

They were closeted up in his office for nearly five more hours, mainly because the plan continued to evolve as Kraal’s agents sent more information. Jason spent that time downloading terrastrings of data into the memory built within in the endolimbs, surface maps, old subway tunnel diagrams, building layouts for every structure within ten kathra of the capitol complex, the diagrams of complex itself which showed every maintenance tunnel, every air duct, any place where Jason would fit, it was on those diagrams and thus downloaded into the endolimb memory. The location of every one of Kraal’s people was planned out to assist him, locations of equipment caches just in case he got stuck on the planet and had to go to ground—Kraal really did plan for everything, including the possibility that the Syndicate would figure out what the bridges were and find a way to disrupt them before he could escape—and multiple routes to get back to the factory base if it came down to it, where he would hide out and wait for things to calm down enough for them to get him off the planet.

When Jason, Miaari, and Kraal left the office, Jason had so much information about the capitol complex and region surrounding it that he could walk the entire place blindfolded without bumping into anything. They also worked quite a bit on what might happen the moment he landed, from the possibility that he would be thrown in a jail cell the moment he got off the dropship all the way to a scenario where they just tried to gun him down the instant they had a clear shot. They had plans for that, for if he was brought into the building and taken somewhere other than the main meeting chamber, if he was attacked in the hallways on the way, if they tried to stall by making him wait hours and hours and hours, just about any possible scenario.

And for all of them, Jason's primary mission was to *not attack them*. He would attack only if he was attacked first, no matter what scenario he faced when he got there. His job was to negotiate, to *sincerely* negotiate, which was how his intent would fool the Oracles and cause them to make a bad prediction, would see only the *potential* for danger to the Board instead of guaranteed danger. They would face danger only if they made the wrong decision, because if they did indeed negotiate an end to the war, the Confederation would have no reason to kill them. He would walk into that building with the serious intent to try to negotiate an end to the war, and much of what they talked about was how he would do just that. For that, they brought Mesaiima and Ethikk into the discussion, coming over in their Hall of Peace bionoids, and Dahnai took that opportunity to all but push her way into his office and sit quietly on the couch near the door. The three of them discussed negotiation strategies as the two Kimdori and Dahnai watched on, until Jason felt that they had a solid initial strategy that they would refine over the days until the conference.

When they were done, Jason dismissed everyone else, and then sat behind his desk staring directly at Dahnai, who did not move off the couch until the door was closed. And even then, she sat there and glared at him for a long, long moment. *[If that wasn't a bionoid, I would punch you in the face so hard,]* she finally declared, communing directly with his bionoid's processor and by proxy him.

[You'd try. I can still kick your ass hand to hand, Dahnai, and you know it,] he replied, which made her nearly scowl at him. *[Did Jyslin talk to you, or did you refuse to listen?]*

[I don't see how she can allow this!] she suddenly raged.

[She doesn't like this anymore than you do, Dahnai. Or I do, for that matter. But she understands that it must be done. There are times in our lives, love, where we must do things that we don't want to do, because others are depending on us. Believe me, I'm not doing this to be a hero. I'm not doing this for glory, or thrills. I'm doing this because I have the best chance to pull this off. It is my duty as the Grand Duke to protect my people, and in this case, protect our allies. You think I want to do this? You think I'm not nearly worried sick over what might happen? I am. But acting that way would upset the people I'm depending on to get me home alive, so I have to be strong so they can be strong. That is my job, Dahnai. I have to set an example for others, and above all else, I have to walk the walk. My people believe in me because they know I would do anything to keep them safe, that I do not put myself over others for my own self-interest, and I will not break their faith in me. I've said it before, and I'll say it again, because it has never applied more than here and now, Dahnai. I serve the House of Karinne. The House of Karinne does not serve me. Long after I'm gone, be it because of the conference or because of old age, there will still be a House of Karinne. And it is my most sacred duty to ensure that the House will prosper when my time is done and Rann takes my place. My life belongs to the House of Karinne, and if needs be, I will lay it down to ensure that the House survives.]

She glowered at him, then looked away sharply. *[Trelle, I hate you sometimes, Jason Karinne,]* she communed in frustration, disgust, and fear.

[You knew who I was when you brought me into your life, Dahnai. You can't complain now.]

[There's more to this than that, Jason. You want to do this! I've felt it, Jys has felt it, even Symone has felt it. There's a part of you that hates the Benga, far more than just because we're at war with them, and it's something that's not you. You are the most compassionate man I have ever known, yet the very thought of the Benga stirs something truly dark inside of you. And by Trelle, I'm not going to stand by and watch you walk into a fucking fire just because you hate them so much you want to be there in person to watch the Board die. And you won't admit it, even to yourself!]

“You’re damn right I want to watch them burn!” he shouted, jerking to his feet and slamming his hands on the desk, striking it so hard that the synth-plas cracked around his hands, an audible sound that echoed through the room. “You have *no idea* what they did to my little girl! Every time I look at her, I can feel it, feel the *horror* lurking under the locks Ryn put in her mind, and it hurts me so much to see those scars inside her! I promised myself I would never let them hurt an innocent child again, and by *God*, I will keep that promise! They are evil, and I will not let that evil out of Andromeda! I will cage them and watch them eat themselves like a cancer until there’s nothing left of them! I will protect my daughter, and every other daughter out there from those fucking monsters!”

She gave him a shocked look, then awareness seemed to flicker in her eyes. She walked over to him slowly as he tried to get control of himself, nearly breaking the merge, then it stabilized when she put her hands on his shoulders. “You *are* the most compassionate man I have ever known, Jason Karinne,” she said softly. “You want to take all the pain in the world and put it on your own shoulders to spare us that burden. But this isn’t you. This isn’t the way. The Parri would tell you that,” she told him in a gentle, soothing tone, sliding her hands up to his shoulders and patting the two *jaingi* there, which Rook had faithfully reproduced on the bionoid. “You shouldn’t be doing this thinking that it’s going to somehow make Aria feel better, that you can take that pain away by killing the ones you think are responsible for it. Promise me, Jason, that if you do this, you won’t do it for revenge. You do that for me, and I won’t object to you going. Promise me, Jason Karinne. Promise me that if you do this, it won’t be about getting vengeance for Aria. It will be about *protecting* Aria, by ending the war that might threaten her further down the road.”

“Why would you ask that?”

“Because sometimes, a woman will believe that her vengeance matters more than her life,” she said steadily. “And you love that little girl so much that you might believe that she’d be happier without you just because you killed the men that might hurt her again. That’s not what she wants, Jason. She doesn’t want revenge. She wants *you*. She wants her Pam, and her Pamma, and her siblings, and her new family. Don’t hurt her even more by taking the one thing in this world she loves the most away from her.”

He gave her a deep look, his heart in his eyes, then he dragged her into a crushing embrace...almost *too* crushing, given she gave a breathless wheeze. He eased his grip enough for her to breathe, and just held onto her for a long, long time as the chaos of his emotions ran its course, as he came to terms with something he hadn't even understood about himself. She was right. Deep down, he wanted to walk into that room and *kill* the Board, to burn them to ash with his telekinetic power and watch in satisfaction as the life faded from their eyes just before the fire consumed them...and that would have caused the entire plan to fail. A plan he had rallied to adopt just so he could get into that room. He would have walked into that room with the intent to kill, deep down in his soul, and that would have caused the entire plan to collapse, gotten him killed, and possibly escalated the war.

He didn't think himself capable of it...but she was right. There was a part of him that hated the Benga—not entirely true. He didn't hate Lieutenant Gen Lun Ba Ru, he actually rather admired the man. What he hated was the *Syndicate*, and the members of the Board were the rulers of it, the manifestation of everything that was evil about the society they controlled. Jason Karinne had fallen victim to *hate*, the one thing the Parri *shaman* had warned him not to do. And Dahnai had sensed it, had the courage to confront him over it where Jyslin felt he would work it out himself...and she had just saved him from making a dreadful mistake.

"I love you, Dahnai Merrane," he whispered.

"And I love you, Jason," she replied, patting him on the back.

The revelation changed both nothing and everything, he knew. He had committed himself to this course of action, had even actively rallied for it when Kraal first started to explore the idea of sending an agent to deliver the spiders under the guise of a negotiation, and despite everything, he still believed that it was the best option. It would do what they needed done with the least amount of damage to the Syndicate's governmental structure, wouldn't incite the Board's successors to continue the war, and saved the most lives on both sides. But what did change was his intentions going in. He was planning—*hoping*—on the Board betraying him and trying to kill him, which would give him the excuse to go after them, to kill them himself. And that would make the plan fail, because the Oracles would foresee it and give the Board advance warning. Jason knew now, and

understood, that he absolutely could not, under any circumstances, attack the Board with the intent to kill. If he did, they would have the trap ready for him. The Board had to be alive when he walked out of that room, or ran from it, else he was the one who wouldn't be walking out of it alive. He could defend himself from the Board's guards and automated defenses, but he couldn't directly attack the Board himself. Under no circumstances could he directly attack, or he would ruin everything, and most likely get himself killed in the bargain. He had to look those he hated most in the eyes and then walk away, despite knowing he could kill them all and they couldn't stop him.

This was not the time to be a father, or to be the Grand Duke Karinne.

This was the time to be a *shaman*.

He pushed Dahnai out enough to look at her. "I have to go somewhere, love," he told her in a calm voice.

"I think I know where."

"I think you do as well. I need the advice of the Parri, to help me be able to do what I need to do without my emotions taking control. If I walk into that meeting looking for a reason to kill them myself, I'm the one that's going to die. The Oracles they control will foresee it, because the *intent* to kill them will be there. I think I need some emotional therapy, and the *shaman* has always been able to bring out the best in me. She'll make sure I'm mentally ready for what I have to do."

"Then you'd better go, love, so you can be back home before the kids get home from school," she prompted. "Besides, you don't have much time, and you have to be ready."

"You're right. And *thank you*, Dahnai," he said, leaning over and kissing her on the cheek tenderly. "You may have just saved my life."

"You belong to me, Jason, just as much as Kellin does. And I don't like losing my toys," she said with a gentle smile, making him chuckle despite himself.

"I won't dash that dream, love. At least not today."

Chapter 12

Raira, 7 Demaa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Sunday, 16 March 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Raira, 7 Demaa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The Village, Karis

Of all the times he'd been here, it certainly felt very different this time.

Stepping off the hatch stairs of a touring skimmer, something like a flying RV, and carrying tiny little Mrar Rahl on his shoulder, Jason looked over the assembly of huts in the Parri village and couldn't ignore that strange feeling. He'd been here hundreds of times and had never really *looked* at this place. He knew what it looked like, knew where everything was, but he'd never really considered this village of 63 huts to have any meaning beyond it being where the Parri lived. But since he'd be here for the next several days, up until he left for E Chaio, it incited him to consider the village as more than a collection of wood and thatch buildings.

The village was crescent shaped, sitting in a very gentle valley, following the curve of a low, sloping hill. The *shaman's* house was in the center of that crescent and near the inside edge, not far at all from the area where ships landed to visit. And in keeping with what he knew of the *shaman*, her hut was no more grand than anyone else's. It was a little larger, due to her need to entertain guests, but it didn't look out of place among the others. The huts were not arranged in any discernable pattern, but the huts were spaced far enough apart for each one to give the village a feeling of openness.

This was where he would be staying for the next few days. He was going to be here alone, or at least stay in the skimmer by himself, and others like Mrar, Miaari, and his family would be coming and going rather than

staying with him. And he was here now instead of five days ago because he was out of the hospital. His arms were healed after four days of constant work by millions of medical spiders, and he was medically cleared for Mrar's training. The *shaman* had also declined to teach him anything while he was using his bionoid, because, she told him, the machine had no heart and thus he could not listen. He'd tried to explain to her that he wasn't there to train as a *shaman*, that he needed her help to be able to stand in front of the Board and not lash out at them and kill them, but she wouldn't even do that. So, he had spent the last five days preparing for the mission with Miaari and Kraal, memorizing everything he needed to know and learning as much about the Benga and the Board as he could, information collected by Kraal so he would be well armed for this mission.

He knew all 153 of their names. He knew their general mannerisms, and he knew much of their individual histories, how they had managed to rise to a seat on the Board. He knew which ones of them were militaristic and which were not. He knew which ones were the most cruel, the most petty, the most spiteful, and that was going to be very important when he stood before them. Though his mission was mainly a ruse to get him in the room with them, if he could get a peace treaty out of them without having to kill them, then he'd take a shot at it. That meant he had to be ready to negotiate, and part of negotiation was knowing one's adversary.

He'd be working more with Miaari and Kraal over the next seven days, but now he was shifting to the next phase of his preparation, and that was getting his ass out of there alive. And that was why he was here, and why Mrar was with him. For the next Terran week, Mrar would be training him in telekinetic applications that he could learn in that time frame that could save his life, and he'd be learning how to master his hatred of the Syndicate with the *shaman* so his prejudices didn't contaminate the mission and get him killed. But the *shaman* had it in her head that he was here to learn more about being a *shaman*, to delve deeper into their mysticism. And he honestly wouldn't mind learning more about it while he was here, but that wasn't the primary objective of this. He was here to more or less get psychiatric therapy from someone he trusted so he could let go of the hatred he held in his heart for those who had mentally scarred his adopted daughter, very much the reaction of an aggrieved father at the harming of his child. The *shaman* was no psychiatrist, but she more than anyone else

on Karis had an uncanny knack for making Jason see the world in a different way, to expand his horizons, and change the fundamental way he thought about things. And if anyone on Karis could help him in the time he had, it was the Parri.

The *shaman* ambled towards him from the edge of the village, walking on all fours, then she stopped and rose up on her hind legs when she reached him, her head going from his chest level to well above his own, and it reminded him again how *large* Parri were. They weren't just tall when standing erect, they were burly, stocky, heavily built, and they were physically exceptionally powerful. Add in the large, nasty retractable claws on their hands and feet, and they were also very well armed, though they were no threat to anyone. Despite being so large and powerful and imposing, the Parri were the most gentle, peaceful race that Jason had ever known, even more so than the Imbiri. "It is good to see you again, Jason Karinne," she said in her gentle, rich voice, reaching her large paws out and taking his hands, smiling down at him. "And I see you have brought a guest. Welcome to you, tiny one."

"*Shaman*, this is Mrar Rahl," Jason answered, motioning at the small Pai on his shoulder. "She's of a species called the Pai. You'll have to excuse her, but she doesn't speak Faey. Would it offend you if she sends to you?"

"Of course not, Jason Karinne, though we cannot answer in return."

"Her interface can translate what you say, she just doesn't like using it to speak for her. She thinks it's not precise enough in translating the intent of her thoughts."

It's not, she affirmed, sending so that a non-telepath could understand her. *I'm honored to meet you, Mistress shaman. Jason has a very high opinion of you and your people.*

"He has spoken quite highly of your people as well, Mrar Rahl. He is quite impressed by your intelligence and adventurous temperament."

"Mrar is a Pai Master, *shaman*. Her people are the most skilled telekinetics in the entire galaxy. She's going to teach me while I'm here, prepare me for my task."

Jason explained what he has to do, and I'm confident I can teach him several applications that will protect him. I'm not about to lose my favorite

student, she smiled over at him, her eyes playful as she patted the back of his neck.

“Samin would cry if he heard you say that, Mrar,” Jason said, which made her laugh.

Samin’s a great student, Jason, but he’s too serious. You’re much more fun, she sent, her thought slightly mischievous.

“You are such a scamp, Mrar,” he teased, which made the *shaman* smile.

The *shaman* took the time to get to know Mrar as they sat around the firepit in her hut and enjoyed tea, then they got down to business. The *shaman* and Mrar haggled a bit over how they’d split up Jason’s day, which was a bit of an amusing spectacle that showed off the hidden personality of the *shaman* and Mrar’s rather fearless nature. The *shaman* was incredibly wise and intelligent, but she was also a female that knew how to laugh, didn’t take herself too seriously, and she seemed honestly taken with the outspoken little Pai. Mrar too had a funny side lurking under that fur and imperious countenance, though she was usually all business when it came to training. Jason had suspected that Mrar and the *shaman* would get along, and he was happy to see himself proven correct.

After Jason’s life for the next seven days was carved up like a Thanksgiving turkey between the two of them, he left the hut with the *shaman* as Mrar went to explore the village. They walked together out of the village, out among the *oye* trees, and Jason found it a bit amusing that the birds hunting for food on the ground around the trees didn’t fly away from either of them, seemed utterly unafraid of both of them. They reached an exposed root of a tree and the *shaman* stopped them and sat down in the conventional way on the root, then reached out her paw-like hand. One of the foraging birds landed on her outreached finger, and she gave it a gentle smile and stroked the feathers on its head with a thick finger. “You seek to shed the hatred in your heart for those who have done you harm, Jason Karinne. That is a proper thing, and something that all *shaman* must do before they can walk further down the path,” she said, petting the bird, then it gave a chirp of thanks and took off, going back to its foraging.

“It really has nothing to do with me learning more about your ways, *shaman*, though I’ll be happy to learn more while I’m here,” he answered honestly, sitting down beside her. “The loveless ones employ precognates that can look into the potential future, and if I walk into that room with my emotions blinding me to my task, they’ll see great and immediate danger in my presence. That will most likely get me killed. So I have to be able to walk into that room and look the loveless ones in the eyes and *not* lash out at them for what they’ve done to my daughter. And for that, I need you,” he said, looking over at her and putting a hand on her shoulder. “If anyone can help me get a leash on my emotions and get me out of that room alive, it’s you. Mrar is going to teach me telekinetic techniques that will protect me and help me escape if I’m trapped, and you’ll teach me how to keep hold of my emotions so I don’t do anything rash, or stupid,”

“Then you must learn how to *forgive*, Jason Karinne,” she told him evenly. “To forgive is both the most difficult and most noble thing that one can do. It is the hardest thing in the world to forgive harm to one’s dearest ones.”

“I’m...not sure I’ll ever be able to do that, *shaman*,” he answered honestly, looking down at the ground, seeing tree ants walking back and forth in a line near his feet. “You yourself said that the loveless ones must be opposed. To forgive them is not opposing them.”

“An astute argument of logic, Jason Karinne. But affairs of the heart are rarely as logical as the mind would wish them to be,” she told him.

“I don’t necessarily need to forgive them to be able to walk into the room and not kill them,” he challenged.

“Yes, Jason Karinne. You do,” she returned. “To show mercy is in itself a form of forgiveness. You do not have to love them, for they do not have it within themselves the capability to return that love. Nor does it mean that you have to forget their past deeds, or not stand in challenge to the acts they may commit in the future. But you do have to forgive them the trespasses they have visited upon you and those dear to you. You must give them a *choice*, Jason Karinne, and allow them to decide their own path. And if that path leads them to their own destruction, then so be it. But the choice itself is what matters, Jason Karinne, and that choice must be offered with forgiveness.”

“I...I think I understand what you mean,” he said, looking at one of the birds when it hopped up on the root, then up onto his leg. It was about the size of a small egret, a fairly large bird to live inland, but it clearly wasn’t a water bird, for its beak wasn’t long or pointed. It was a beak meant for nuts, berries, and small insects. It had soft tan plumage with a dark brown head and had two white bands of feathers in its wings and in its tail, like the mockingbirds he’d seen when they were in Chesapeake. His gestalt informed him that the bird was known as a *scratcher bird*, named so due to its habit of digging into the ground for seeds, insects, and edible roots. It was native to Exeven and had been introduced into the Karis ecosystem two years ago, to great success. He reached down and scratched the bird at the base of its neck, behind its head, and it leaned down and let him. Its feathers were surprisingly soft. “We Terrans have a saying, to let someone hang themselves with their own rope.”

“An apt metaphor,” she agreed. “All you need do, Jason Karinne, is show mercy. And if you feel that it is beyond you, then I am always here to talk,” she smiled, looking over at him as he continued to scratch the bird’s shoulders and neck. “But there are some things I can teach you that might help you, Jason Karinne, to bring you peace and serenity and allow you to master your emotions. The first and most important of them is to learn how to listen.”

“Still scheming to teach me that, eh?”

She gave him an amused look. “To learn to listen, Jason Karinne, you must have an open heart and calm mind. I believe that your people call it *meditation*. To listen, your thoughts must be quieted and your mind open to sounds your ears cannot hear. If you engage the loveless ones with a serene mind, it will allow you to think and act with restraint and measure.”

“Now *that* I can understand, *shaman*,” he said animatedly. “I learned something similar to that when I was much younger, when me and my father were learning Aikido.”

“Then with luck you will learn the basics of how to listen quickly,” she said with a gentle smile down at the bird perched on his thigh, reaching down and patting it on the head with a single finger. “I see that your heart’s voice is growing much stronger,” she noted with approval in her voice. “Another matter we will discuss while you are here.”

“I’m not sure what help it would be on a world like E Chaio,” he said with a grim tone, remembering how *dead* the planet was. They’d built over the surface, leaving no life but that which they allowed to grow for aesthetics. The only life left on the planet was the life in gardens and terrariums, which was only kept around because it made things look pretty. He doubted there were any animals larger than mice left on the entire planet.

“A strong heart, filled with love, calls out in a much louder voice, Jason Karinne. It is the strongest part of you, and what defines you as a *shaman*. And you should never underestimate the worth of it.”

“Not everything has worth everywhere, *shaman*. E Chaio is a dead world,” he told her. “The Benga have killed everything to build their cities. The entire planet’s land surface is covered over by artificial construction, choking the life out of the earth, and the seas have been poisoned to the point where they are a toxic soup. Animals being able to hear my heart’s voice means little in a place where there are no animals left.”

“It is not just animals like that bird that can hear your heart, Jason Karinne. *Anyone* can, at least those whose hearts are open to listen. That is what brings those of this world to you and inspires their loyalty, because they can hear the truth of your heart and it brings them comfort and assurance. But I fear the loveless ones would be closed to the message of your heart, because a heart that denies all love will be deaf to your heart’s message. And I believe that with our limited time, we should attend to the matters at hand,” she said with a smile. “I’m afraid I am taking him from you, small one. Would you mind terribly?”

At that, the bird gave a deep-throated chirping call, then it hopped down and ambled away, going back to its foraging. “To learn to listen, you must first learn to quiet your mind,” she told him. “And this is what I feel will serve you best when you face the loveless ones, Jason Karinne. A calm mind, serene in its workings and listening to the advice of its own heart, does not make rash or unwise decisions. Your heart will guide you in your task, Jason Karinne, so you must learn to listen to it. And to do that, you must quiet your mind. So, we will practice listening, Jason Karinne. First with your ears, and then with your heart. A listening person does not speak,

so to listen with your mind and heart, your mind must not be distracted by random thoughts.”

And so, his training began...though it wasn't exactly the kind of training he expected. For the morning and early afternoon, Jason took lessons in the art of meditation, the art of *listening*, which was actually a hell of a lot harder than most people realized it could ever be. The idea of *not thinking* sounds easy enough until it was put into practice, and for a Generation, who often had a passive split or two going that was doing nothing *but* thinking, it was even harder. Jason found the idea of concentrating on only one thing, and *not* thinking about what he was doing, to be much harder than he expected. He'd practiced something akin to meditation when they took Aikido classes when they were stationed in Japan, but that was nowhere near the kind of meditation the *shaman* was trying to teach him. And it explained those many times he had wandered into her hut while she was doing it, how her mind seemed to just be *turned off*...it was a state of meditation so deep that all cognitive thought had been quelled, even the reflexive thoughts coming from the subconscious, leaving the mind almost completely open and empty. That was something Jason could pull off for maybe two minutes, like how he'd evaded Jyslin way back when he first met her. But he couldn't do it anywhere near as long as she could.

The ultimate in listening.

After a simple lunch of barley soup and coarse grain bread from the village's garden, Jason moved from one cat teacher to another. Mrar had spent the morning in the village, getting to know the Parri and exploring their very simple lifestyle, and she sat with him by the firepit in the center of the village after they ate. She stood beside him as he sat cross-legged on the ground, which still put his head over hers, her tail slashing behind her enough to thump against his side and back a few times. “I've been considering what I can teach you in the time we have that'll be the most useful,” she began. “But most of them are *offensive*. If what you're interested in is defensive techniques, well, that limits the options a little bit. Most defensive techniques take a bit longer to learn because you have to be much more careful. It's way easier to generate a stream of plasma than it is to defend against it.”

He nearly gawked. “Do *what?*”

“Plasma,” she said, looking over at him. “You know, the fourth state of matter? You can create it with your gift. It’s not that hard,” she said dismissively. “And believe me, a plasma stream gets results.”

“Are you serious? How can you generate plasma in a place like this?” he protested.

“The air, silly,” she chided him. “What is plasma you use in your power systems made of? Hydrogen and helium. Well, you can turn virtually any gas into a plasma without much effort. You draw in the air around you, convert it into a plasma state, then project it out towards your target. It’s something of a basic advanced technique, excuse the pun, one of the first things we learn when we start our Master training.”

He gave her a wild look. The Pai could, in effect, duplicate the effect of a hot plasma weapon just with *telekinesis*?

“I haven’t shown you *everything*, Jason,” she said with a fanged grin. “We decided not to teach the really dangerous stuff to you until we got a better idea of your capabilities, for obvious reasons.” He just shook his head, which made her laugh. “But there’s one thing I think you can learn in the time we have that will be very useful, Jason. It’s not going to be easy, but it’s something I’m certain you can do, and I think it’s the perfect complement to what you already know. Your skill in telepathy thanks to that guard of yours will let you deal with them on the mindscape without issue, and your ability to warp space will keep them from shooting at you. What I’m going to teach you should let you get out of any room or dungeon they stick you in, so they can’t imprison you.”

“What is that?”

“Quantum phasing,” she replied, and his eyes just lit up. He’d completely forgotten about that! The Pai could telekinetically alter their quantum phase, which made them unable to interact with anything not in the same quantum phase! It turned them into ghosts, allowed them to pass through solid matter, because the matter didn’t match their phase! Samin had told them they could do it, but he hadn’t really considered learning it himself until that moment!

“Holy shit, seriously? You think I could learn something like that?”

“You and Samin and a few others, definitely. Most of the others... maybe in a few years, when I’ve had time to train them properly,” she said speculatively. “It’s not gonna be easy, but if there’s one thing I can teach you that’ll give you the best chance to walk out of that building alive, that’s it. The only way they can stop you is with a multiphased shield, something that can match your quantum state. You just have to be careful if they use phased energy as a power source, you may run into their power lines in the walls when you walk through, and that *can* affect you. So my suggestion is you don’t get exotic. Only use it to go through doors, windows, things that you know don’t hold anything inside them you can’t see that might zap you.”

“Teach on, Mrar,” he said eagerly.

“This won’t be easy, Jason. This is an advanced ability, even for us. I wouldn’t even be teaching it to you if we weren’t in this situation,” she warned. “And this can kill you if you’re not careful. If you unphase inside a solid object, the *least* bad thing that can happen is that you lose whatever’s stuck in the wall.”

“What’s the worst that can happen?”

“Blowing up with the force of a thermite grenade,” she replied with a straight face. “If atomic particles happen to enter the same phase occupying the same space, they annihilate each other as if it was a matter-antimatter reaction, releasing their energy into space. If enough of them do it at the same time, boom.”

“ E equals MC^2 ,” he muttered.

She nodded. “The mass converts to energy, and it doesn’t take much matter to create enough energy to blow up the room.”

“Truth,” he breathed, then gave her a long look. “How do you deal with air? Don’t the air molecules move through the body while in a quantum phase?”

“I’ll explain the mechanics of it later,” she told him. “For now, we’ll focus on the basic overview and what you’ll need to know to use this technique. It’s way more advanced than anything I’ve taught you yet, but some of the things I’ve taught you will apply here. Those are basic skills you build on to perform the more advanced techniques. Right now, I just

want to teach you enough for you to do it without blowing up a building if you do it wrong. We'll refine things and I'll teach you all the various applications of it when you come back. But we won't be dawdling, because there's something else I want to teach you that might be almost as useful. But if I only have time to teach one, I want you to learn quantum phasing. If you learn that fast enough, I'll teach you one other technique I think may help you. Temporal shifting."

"Temporal—*time*? You mean you can manipulate *time*?" he gasped.

"What is time, Jason? It's the movement of matter on a vector through the curvature of space," she said dismissively. "And you already know how to manipulate space, through defensive warping and generating Torsion. You're just doing it the other way, which isn't nearly as easy. Space is by its nature curved, so it's not that hard to curve it harder. But it's an entirely different matter to flatten it out and do it to the space you're occupying without killing yourself. Both applications create time dilation, but Torsion's dilation is contained inside the effect. What I'm going to teach you is how to affect temporal flow on *yourself*, in effect speeding you up in relation to those outside the effect. If you're moving at a temporal speed five times faster than everyone else, they'll have a hell of a time keeping up with you."

He gave her a look of complete astonishment, then shook his head. "Remind me to never, ever get into a war with the Pai, Mrar."

She gave him a sly grin. "Now you know why the Muri are so nice to us despite us being so much smaller," she said dryly, which made him laugh helplessly.

"Seriously. How did you learn to do this?"

"The same way anyone does. Trial, error, and more than a few fatalities along the way," she said seriously. "Masters died exploring their power, Jason. That's why we're very careful about who we teach and what we teach them. Very few Pai are selected to undertake this kind of training, even among those with the raw power to use the techniques, because it can easily kill both themselves and a lot of people around them. But I will say this. There are a respectable number of Generations that could learn everything I know, who have the discipline as well as the ability, and you're

one of them. I'm not about to teach anyone something that I don't think they have the discipline and maturity to use...or know when *not* to use it."

"Well, that explains a hell of a lot," he said soberly. "Some of the Generations are a bit miffed at you that you won't teach them things you teach others. Now I know why."

"Having power is one thing. Using it responsibly is another," she said simply.

"Alright then, teacher, let's start," he prompted. "Exactly how do I go about shifting myself into a quantum phase?"

"Not easily," she replied, sitting down beside him. "This isn't kitten play, Jason. This is *way* harder than what I've already taught you, but we don't have time for me to work you up to it. I wouldn't even attempt it if you didn't know so much about quantum mechanics already, and that's gonna matter. Your education as an engineer is going to help you with this."

"I'm glad it's good for something other than inventing stuff that explodes. Both intentionally and accidentally," he drawled.

She chuckled. "Let's not do that here. Alright, step one. Learning how to reach into the quantum realm," she said professionally.

Chiira, 15 Demaa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Monday, 24 March 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Chiira, 15 Demaa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

The Village, Karis

"Slowly, Jason," Mrar said. She was sitting on a log by the firepit, and half the Parri village was watching as he stood in the clearing between it and the *shaman's* hut. He was wearing a workout tank top, a pair of memory fabric exercise shorts that hugged his skin without feeling tight or constricting. "Remember the first rule."

“Don’t fall in,” he said in a distracted voice as he prepared himself for this. Over the last eight days, he had learned far more about quantum mechanics than he believed, because he had reached into them with his own mind and seen them from the *inside*...and that experience had nearly driven him to the brink of madness. Quantum mechanics were best described as a jumble of paradoxes that all cancelled each other out to create something that a rational mind could understand in terms of effect, but not cause. How they worked was beyond mortal man, but after studying them long enough, mankind had learned to predict some of their more stable aspects.

And this was one of them. The first step to this technique was to encapsulate himself in a bubble of staged space as close to his body as he could make it, like an airskin shield just tikra from his skin, and that would form the boundary of the phase shift. Because he couldn’t interact with anything in that state, not even air, he had to bring air with him when he did this. If he didn’t, his lungs would collapse and he’d suffer the effects of depressurization because he’d effectively be in a vacuum and would die both very quickly and very painfully. Air was not a multiphasic material, so if he shifted into a quantum state, he’d be shifting into a state that had no air pressure...a vacuum. So, to protect from depressurization, he had to shift a volume of air around him and hold it together within a telekinetic bubble while he was in that state. The downside was that air was very hard to shift into a quantum phase due to its light density, so he had to take as little of it with him as possible, just enough to prevent decompression. That meant that the time limit for this technique was effectively how long he could hold his breath, plus maybe about a minute of additional air carried with him when he shifted phase.

And that was just the first pitfall. The second was *gravity*, the only unphased or non-interphasic natural force in the universe that could affect him while he was shifted into a quantum state. He had to maintain a border between the bottom of the bubble, which had to be directly against the bottom of his shoes, or feet if he was barefoot like he was now, and the outside world, or gravity would draw him down into the planet...where he would die once his air ran out or he exhausted himself and he returned to normal, subsequently materializing inside solid rock. This was the trickiest part of the whole thing for him, truth be told, because he had to allow the two misphased materials to interact, but not enough to prevent one from

moving through the other. There was a delicate balance in it, and that balance shifted depending on the composition and density of the material under his bubble. The greater the density, the easier it was to hold the border, which made it very useful for when he was standing on a floor. But just like Shadowcat from the *X-Men*, he could walk on air by adjusting that border to allow it to interact with something like air, with very little density. It was just *bloody fucking hard*.

That was why the border had to be against his feet or boots, because he needed the density of his body's molecular structure to interact with the density of the material upon which he wanted to stand, forming the barrier between the two phases that was resistant enough to hold him against gravity.

He formed the bubble around himself, right against his skin, and then reached into the very fabric of quantum reality and *skewed* it within the bubble, which caused him to feel that brief disorientation he knew meant that he had just pulled himself out of the base phase state of the universe. He looked at Mrar and the *shaman* and wasted little time, turning and stepping forward, which caused him to walk directly through a large wooden pillar that had been set up beside him, carefully managing the border so his feet could pass through but didn't allow them to pass through the ground when he stepped through and put his foot back down. As soon as he was well through, making sure by looking back, he very carefully relaxed his power in a way that caused the air he was occupying to get pushed out of his phased space, forming a momentary vacuum and a light *pop* sound of rapidly displaced air that he could hear because he was in the same phase as the displaced air. He immediately blew out his breath explosively and leaned over, his hands on his knees, panting for breath as his head began to pound. Doing that caused almost instant migraine-level headaches, but the good part was that they only lasted a few seconds.

"Very good, Jason. You did everything right," Mrar said approvingly. "The headaches will eventually stop once you get enough practice."

"It almost doesn't make it worth it," he said seriously, wincing as it felt like his head was going to explode, then he stood back up and felt blood seep down his lip. He'd lost so much blood over the last eight days, he was surprised that he hadn't been hospitalized for anemia.

“It will be if they lock you in a cage,” she told him. “Now deal with the pillar.”

“How?”

“However you think will remove it as an obstacle,” she answered, standing up. She raised a shield of pure telekinetic force around her and the *shaman*, protecting them if his concept of *dealing with* the pillar turned out to be dramatic.

For that, he resorted to something she’d already taught him, something he cheekily named the *Gambit Attack*. He lunged expertly up to the pillar, then struck it with the open palm of his hand, striking it at an upward angle. His power flooded into the pillar as pure kinetic energy, and that invested energy caused the pillar to suddenly blast off into the air, along with a sudden wash of air flowing back away from him, whipping at his hair like he was standing in a gale. It soared all the way out over the village and landed beside his skimmer, a smoking, charred hole where his hand had made contact where the transfer of energy had taken place. It was amusingly close to Gambit’s mutant power from the *X-Men* comics, the ability to charge kinetic energy into an object. Gambit did it to outside objects, but the technique Mrar taught him did it to his own hand, which then transferred that kinetic energy to whatever he touched. The end effect was exactly what happened. Whatever he touched suddenly had all that kinetic energy, and it had a vector because of the movement of his arm, and that caused the object to get blasted away from him on that vector. It was like his hand was a gun and the object he touched was a bullet, and it could be used to devastating effect if one was clever. It turned virtually anything into a potentially lethal projectile, even something as innocuous as a piece of paper...or a playing card.

Mrar could send an object weighing a benkonn flying nearly a hundred shakra when she used that technique with her full power. That was an object weighing nearly a metric ton flying about 33 meters. That was just, just *insane*.

“Shield,” she called, and he complied by forming a telekinetic shield exactly like hers, a curved arc of pure telekinetic energy that formed a protective physical barrier. “Fire,” she called, and he raised his hands and invested the air around them with intense energy, which caused the air to

ignite and burst into flame. He protected his hands from the heat with another trick Mrar taught him, absorbing the thermal energy and redirecting it into the fire, in effect building the heat with more heat, which lessened the effort he had to invest into it and made it exceptionally efficient. “Ice,” she called, and he complied by using that selfsame trick in a large area, draining the air around him of its heat by quelling the motion of the molecules within the area of effect...and that motion was what heat really was. Mist began to form within the effect from the water vapor in the air, and the grass around his feet began to frost over. “Radiance,” she called, then she and the *shaman* shielded their eyes and looked away. Jason closed his eyes himself as he drew in all light around him, turning the area dim, and then a burst of brilliant, blinding light erupted from his hands, which were the focus, which would temporarily blind and disorient enemies that weren’t wearing visors or other eye protection. That trick probably wouldn’t do much to the guards he expected in the Board’s chamber, but it would work on the Board itself. “Laser,” she ordered, and he reoriented his power, drawing in all light around him, then focused it into a coherent beam and projected it at the ground in front of him, which caused the grass to catch fire and the ground under it to sizzle and burn as the coherent light beam ate into it. When the beam ended, a puddle of molten slag was in the bottom of the shallow depression left behind, which was the melted result of what the beam couldn’t vaporize. “Vortex,” she ordered, and he turned and thrust his open palm away from him. He affected the air all around him with his power, drawing it in and then giving it motion and velocity, forming a tightly compact rotating vortex, like a sideways tornado, that lashed away from his hand. “Scythe,” she demanded, pointing at another wooden post set close to him. He took command of the air with his power and formed its molecules into a line, like a monomolecular blade, and then lashed it at the post with impressive force. The blade of air sliced right through the log with ease, and the top of it slid off the base and dropped to the ground. “Flip it,” she ordered, which made him take a step back and furrow his brow in intense concentration, for she ordered him to do something very, very hard. He affected the space around the piece of cut post and then *reversed gravity* within it, causing it to “fall” up into the air a good thirty shakra. “Crush!” she ordered, and he reached out a hand and then closed it into a fist to help him concentrate. His power surrounded the piece of log, reached deeply into it, and then he affected the space within its molecular structure,

compressing it. That caused the matter within the space to collapse into the effect, radically increasing the density as all the mass was crushed into a small space. It mangled the object beyond recognition, but it did the job. It also caused it to spontaneously combust as all the energy of the object was compressed into a much smaller space, drastically raising its temperature.

All of those except the phasing were things she'd already taught him, and to use it like that, not in a training session but in preparation to defend himself against a room full of enemies, it reminded him once again just how truly powerful the Pai Masters were. They were roughly equivalent in raw unboosted power to the Generations when taken on the average, but it was their *skill* with telekinesis put the Generations to absolute shame. What they could do...it almost seemed like magic.

But it wasn't magic. It was all telekinesis, just employed in ways that Jason had never considered until Mrar started teaching him.

And she'd barely taught him a *tenth* of what she knew.

He...he wasn't sure if he *wanted* to know. To learn those kinds of applications, backed up with the power of a gestalt, it might make the Generations forget who they were. That kind of power could be a drug, an enticement to abandon the strict code of morality they all obeyed, turning into everything Jason feared they might be.

Monsters.

It was why the Pai didn't teach those kinds of techniques to just anyone. The Masters weren't just powerful in their talent, they were also highly disciplined and had towering moral standards. They knew what that kind of power could do, so they kept it out of the hands of those who could not use it responsibly. To become a Master, a Pai had to first pass a deep telepathic screening that went all the way down into the depths of the psyche to ensure that the candidate wouldn't be seduced by their power and turn into something the Masters would then have to stop.

And that was just one reason why he admired the Pai so much.

Panting, hands on his knees to recover from the effort, and his nose bleeding liberally, he looked over at the two female felines and saw expressions of confidence on them. "You have progressed far in just a few days, Jason Karinne," the *shaman* told him with a gentle smile.

“I think I’m ready,” he said, standing back up and wiping at the blood on his upper lip. “I better be, the conference is tomorrow,” he amended in a level tone.

You’re ready, Jason, Mrar agreed, sending so the shaman could understand her. I wish I’d had the time to teach you how to accelerate your personal time frame, but we can’t always get what we want. Between that and phasing, I felt learning phasing was the more important of the two.

“I agree with you,” he nodded. “You’re right. If they lock me in a cage, you gave me a way to get out that won’t trip every alarm in the place. That might buy me the time I need to escape. But you *are* gonna finish teaching me that time trick when I get back.”

I have to, you can’t go around only being half-taught. You may get adventurous, and then we’ll all be attending your funeral, she sent seriously.

“I think we all want to avoid that,” he said as he felt up to using his power again. He brought over a cloth, and wiped the blood from his lip, jaw and neck, from where it flowed down past his mouth. “I’m fairly confident I can handle anything the Benga throw at me physically. Thanks to Ryn, they’re not gonna dominate me telepathically,” he declared.

“The question remains, Jason Karinne. Can you look them in the eyes and forgive?” the *shaman* asked.

“I can look them in the eyes and give them the chance to hang themselves,” he answered evenly. “That’s about as close to forgiveness as I’m going to get. But if you’re asking me if I can negotiate with them, if I can walk out of that room with them still alive...yes. I feel I can,” he answered, walking over to them. “I’ll be thinking of the billions of people who will die if I lose my temper. That on top of the mental focusing techniques you taught me should keep me from doing anything stupid. I made this crucible for myself out of a childish need to punish them for what they did to Aria, to watch them burn with my own eyes,” he admitted. “Now I have to walk through the fire I set out of hatred without getting burned myself.”

“Understanding that truth goes a long way to achieving your goal, Jason Karinne,” the Parri told him seriously. “You are far less likely to fall into a

hole when you can see it in your path.” She stood up and looked down at him, putting her large hand-paws on his shoulders. “You can see the path before you, and you will walk it with calm and caution, Jason Karinne. And if you find yourself in doubt, unsure, remember that even on a world like E Chaio, there are those that believe in you. Let the gentle illumination of their hearts bathe yours in love and reassurance, Jason Karinne.” She reached out a hand, and a Terran finch landed on her thick, stubby finger. She presented the tiny bird to him, and it hopped off her finger and onto his shoulder.

“Why do I suddenly feel like a Disney princess,” he quipped as the tiny bird shifted on his shoulder, he could feel its tiny claws digging a tiny bit into his bare shoulder.

She gave him a small smile. “Even in a world as scarred as E Chaio, there is life, Jason Karinne. And where there is life, there is love. Do not ignore the hidden life, who will come to your call if you have need of them. The lurkers below, the skulkers in the small spaces, the hidden scavengers, they will hear the call of your heart and come to you. A mouse may be tiny and harmless, but a vast army of mice, united in a common purpose, is a force that even a lion must respect.”

“I understand,” he said gravely, then he reached up and took very gentle hold of the tiny bird, bringing it down to where he could see. “But not you, little warrior. You’re going to stay here and protect the village from the scourge of uneaten seeds,” he told the tiny bird, which gave a piping little chirp and flew off. “With your permission, *shaman*, I’m going to return to Karsa. I’m sure Miaari has a lot more information for me about tomorrow, and I need to get Mrar back home before Samin murders me for taking so much of his lesson time away.”

I’ll take that ride. Tea tomorrow, shaman?

“I will have it ready, Mrar Rahl,” she replied with a smile down at the diminutive female. Mrar’s head topped out at Jason’s mid-thigh, and curiously enough, that’s about where she came up to the *shaman*’s leg as well. But, since the Parri had a much longer torso than Jason did, had shorter legs by proportion than a human, it still put her head over his.

And that was it. Eight days of meditation training with the Parri to give him the mental discipline to face the Board without killing them and

telekinetic training with Mrar was done, and he felt prepared for tomorrow's confrontation. All he needed now was the last-minute changes Miaari and Kraal would have for him, and he'd be completely ready. All he'd have to do was wait for tomorrow.

But...tomorrow was going to change things, at least to him, in a small but significant way. Tomorrow, a Generation was going to use their power not to defend Karis, not to protect, but to *attack*. He had absolutely no doubt that the conference was going to devolve into a fight, him against the guards and their automated defenses, and they would see what Jason did not want the world outside Karis to know. They would see exactly what a Generation could do. And with the tactical gestalt built into his arms, they'd see far more than what he would usually be capable of doing unboosted.

They would see a Generation as a *weapon*, the one way Jason did not want anyone to ever think of his race.

They boarded the skimmer, his home for the last eight days, and after Mrar removed a baseball glove from the co-pilot's seat and climbed up into it, Aria's glove, the skimmer lifted off and turned towards Karsa, which was to the east-southeast of the village and all but on the other side of the continent, about 2,100 kathra away. The skimmer was littered with both his clothes and some of the things the kids and the girls had left there when visiting him during his training session, so it very much looked like it was a little bit too "lived in." Jason was usually compulsively neat, but the training had been both mentally and physically exhausting to the point where he'd made a bit of mess in the skimmer over the last few days, too tired to clean up after himself and without Ayama or Surin or Seido to come along behind him and tidy up. But the time had been good for him, in more ways than one. He felt ready for this now. He felt that he could stand in the same room with the Board and not burn them to ash in furious retribution for what they'd done to his adopted daughter. He felt ready to take on their guards when they tried to prevent him from leaving the building, and he knew exactly where to go and what to do to escape, since he would be arriving on a Syndicate shuttle and thus would have no ship to get him home.

That was part of the arrangements made. Jason would transfer from a KPS J-980 jump-capable civilian passenger ship to a Syndicate civilian

transport at a pre-arranged meeting point at the edge of the E Chaio star system and come in the rest of the way to the planet under sub-light, which would be a six hour journey...and that in itself was part of their plan, putting him on a transport for six hours with high-caliber telepaths and seeing what they could learn from him as he battled the boredom of a tedious journey. The transfer would not involve any military vessels, though that didn't mean that much given that a fleet of Karinne warships could be there in about six seconds if necessary. From their point of view, he would be coming alone, unprotected, and completely at their mercy, and they'd believe it to be the trap it was if not for the Oracles. Jason's intent wasn't to attack the Board, his intent was to broker a peace agreement, and in the snapshot of time in which the question was posed to the Oracles, that was all they saw. And so long as Jason's intent did not change, they would not see him as a threat. The only threat they would see would be in if the Board made the mistake of attacking him...*that* was when he became a threat. So long as he was not attacked, he was no threat. And even though he was delivering a payload of deadly spiders, they also posed no threat because it was not the *intent* of the Karinnes to use them. By holding onto that intent as long as possible, it presented a snapshot of time where the meeting had no deadly consequences for the Board unless they made the error of trying to kill him...which they would not try to do face to face with him. They'd pretend to negotiate, and when the time came for Jason to leave, that was when they'd make their move. They'd take him prisoner and then no doubt the Board would have him executed in some very slow and exceptionally painful manner for their viewing pleasure. After all, he was coming in one of their ships, so he had no way to get home without them.

There was just one hole in the plan, on which they had to gamble a bit, and that was that the end result of the entire plan would result in the deaths of the Board. And there was no way they could hide that. They were gambling that the Board wouldn't ask the right question, wouldn't phrase it in a way that would reveal that truth, and that the Oracles, seeing their own freedom in the plan, would either outright lie or omit enough to hide the truth from them.

Then again, the Oracles themselves probably had a whole lot on their minds at the moment. In about two hours, the CCM was going to attack V3ÄE-31, and a series of tightly coordinated special ops missions launched

from all five Nexus stations and from frigates carrying strike teams that would use CMS to get into position without detection would be undertaken to free or kill every single remaining Oracle, including the three on E Chaio. Kraal's people had found all of them, tracked down their locations, and in just two hours, the operation would begin to free them. All 118 of them. So, the negotiation for peace was going to be taking place either during an active battle or immediately following it, depending on how much resistance the CCM encountered, and immediately after the Syndicate had lost all of their active Oracles. The battle itself was also nothing but a diversion to let them get the rest of the Dreamers off the planet, and it satisfied the main reason they were in Andromeda, to recover the Dreamers and deprive the Syndicate of the Oracles. Once those objectives were completed, the CCM and the Karinnes would have no reason to remain, and that would allow them to bargain in good faith.

The loss of the Oracles would probably make the Board even more furious, and Jason was just hoping that their fury made them predictable. That would make it easier for him to make it home alive.

What bothered Jason the most about the whole thing was that he wouldn't be going in with the Storm Riders. Even if he was a reservist, he was still a member of the company, and it felt *wrong* for them to go into battle without him. The 40 active duty and 9 other reserve members were his brothers and sisters, all but a part of his family, and it felt wrong for them to go into battle, to put themselves at risk, without him there with them, fighting shoulder to shoulder with them and doing everything in his power to make sure they all made it back in one piece.

And there would be lives at risk. Once again, the Storm Riders were partnering with the best mindstrikers in the Imperial Marines, the mindstrikers that had gone in with them at Atrovot. While the Storm Riders were going in merged remotely, the Marines in the upper cockpit would most certainly be putting their lives on the line so they could bring their telepathic skills to the battlefield.

He was honestly worried for Kei. He trusted the other Storm Riders, but Kei...she was *his* partner. They'd become close friends during the training exercises leading up to the battle, and he kept in touch with her...even gave her right of passage privileges to Karis. That was because she'd become a

part of Jyslin's pack of girlfriends, like Mikano, and it was hard to go out and have fun when she wasn't on planet.

He almost had to chuckle at that thought. He was a man who cherished peace above all things, but was, admittedly, one of the more dangerous soldiers in the KMS. He was a member of one of the elite mecha companies, considered the fourth most elite in the pecking order, and he didn't earn that position due to his status as the Grand Duke. Tara would have never taken him if he couldn't fight, and he'd been trained by the best riggers in the entire fucking *galaxy*. He was a man of peace that could fight, and would fight, but only fought so he could return to the peace he craved.

Like Daniel said in *Karate Kid*, he learned to fight so he wouldn't *have* to fight.

He landed on the pad behind the house about an hour later, next to the guard barracks, where Miaari and Kraal were standing waiting for him. Both of them looked quite serious, and they had been since this plan was devised. Mrar hopped down the stairs in front of him as he came out, then she headed for the main house to see Jyslin and the kids before getting back to her usual schedule. "Cousins," he greeted, stepping down onto the plascrete...which felt a bit weird on his bare feet.

"Cousin. Nice shorts," Kraal said.

That made Jason laugh. "They're not nearly as uncomfortable as they look," he replied lightly. "You have the revisions to the plan?"

"A few, but not many," Kraal answered as they started for the house. "We have all the equipment in place and ready, and the pack should be in place just before you arrive, both inside and outside the building."

"The addition to the plan is a frigate," Miaari said. "The *Javelin* has made the run through E Chaio's defense network before, and it will be standing by to do so again if you need to be evacuated without using a nexus bridge. However, it's not going to be picking you up anywhere near the capitol. It has to rendezvous with you in a place where it can decloak long enough for you to board. They'll have their active sensor network going with you at large, so we have to take additional steps to protect the frigate."

"And where's that?"

“About fifty kathra offshore, and about two hundred shakra deep,” Kraal answered. “It seems that their sensor net has problems penetrating the water due to all the heavy metal pollution.”

“CMS won’t run underwater. It will blow out the matrix,” Jason warned.

“Normally. We’ve developed a workaround. An external pod generating an airskin shield,” Miaari told him. “They’ll launch the pod just before hitting the water and submerge.”

“What about the pod itself?”

“It’s small enough for an SCM module to hide it from their sensor net,” Kraal answered.

“And how am I getting out there?”

“We have a plan for that. That’s what you’re about to learn,” Miaari said.

“Then let’s get going.”

Jason was a bit distracted, however, because about halfway through their meeting, the attack began. He had holos up on the side so all three of them could monitor the progress of the operation, which had two major phases. Phase one was the initial naval attack, but that was nothing but a diversion for the second phase, and that was the evacuation of the Dreamers using tunnels the Makati had burrowed up into their concentration camp, which led to three separate nexus bridges in the same room. All three couldn’t operate at the same time else they’d interfere with each other, but they were going to stagger them so one bridge was open at all times, allowing them to cycle through them in four-minute intervals. And the instant the last Dreamer was off the planet, then the bridges would start sending the strike teams to the Syndicate Naval flagships and recover the Oracles from them. While that was going on, the frigate strike teams would be assaulting facilities holding Oracles on planets or stations. They would be going in with three frigates per team, one frigate cutting directly into the Oracle’s chamber with its particle beam to disable all power and kill devices to the room as the other two attacked main power feeds into the buildings to cut their power, and the strike teams would go down the holes made by the particle beam, secure or kill the Oracle, and then evacuate back to the frigate. The three frigates would then bomb the facility with a cased

plasma torpedo as they made their escape, which would leave nothing behind but a smoking crater over a kathra across...nearly a kilometer. The cased plasma torpedoes they were using for the operation were the *big ones*, the strategic bomb variety, and had the explosive power of 6,000 Hiroshima nuclear bombs.

That was the strategy for Oracles they intended to recover, but for those they intended to kill due to their loyalty to the Syndicate, they'd simply hit them with a stellar collector fired from about ten light seconds away and vaporize the building, the area around the building, and just about everything else around that. And that side of the operation should be beginning any moment, since it was supposed to start just as the KMS initiated the battle. They were killing the loyal Oracles first to set the stage, to make the Syndicate think that they were going to kill *all* of them, and it was Lorna's hope that it would cause the Syndicate to evacuate some of the personnel from the buildings holding the Oracles and leave the Oracles to die. That would hopefully let the strike teams get in with less resistance. They were going to kill 46 of the 118 remaining Oracles in a staggered pattern that established their intent, but then would be mixed in with the recovery team attacks so the Syndicate wouldn't know which Oracles they were going to kill and which they were going to rescue. And the solar collectors would make killing the Oracles a simple task, since they could obliterate the entire compound holding an Oracle in the blink of an eye.

Really, the collectors could wipe out entire cities and disrupt the target planet's climate if they used them at full power, but they weren't going to do that. They'd be using them at the absolute minimum power they could... which was still enough to wipe out several city blocks, flash-heat the atmosphere around the beam to create a shockwave of fire that would set the entire city on fire, and no doubt kill tens of thousands...some of them civilians. But they had no choice in the matter. If the Syndicate kept even one Oracle, they could clone him or her and they'd be right back in this boat in about thirty years. For this to work, for them to secure real peace with the Syndicate, every single Oracle and Dreamer had to be removed from Syndicate control. And if that meant that they had to eradicate entire cities...then so be it. The deaths suffered today would be nothing compared to the deaths that both sides would suffer if the war escalated.

In this case, the military target was worth the civilian casualties. Jason didn't like it, but he understood the necessity of it.

They paused to watch the holos. The fleet had engaged, and in typical Lorna fashion, they had the Syndicate completely confused within the first ten minutes. She opened up with 3D toys, decoying the enemy's sizable fleet into a position where the KMS command ships and flagships with KMS and Hrathrari escorts dropped into normal space after entering the system in mode two and struck from their flank. Lorna exploited the fact that the ships could move in mode two with the GRAF cannon fully charged, bringing along the only ships in the CCM that could move with them, those equipped with translight drives. The GRAF cannons were backed up by a sizable number of stellar collectors seeded into the system and kept hidden with CMS. The initial attack destroyed or disabled 142 super-ships, including the fleet's flagship, which was struck by both the *Tianne* and *Kinai's* GRAF cannons, just to make sure.

Then, Lorna had the advance element do something absolutely ingenious. Since the rest of the fleet was 12 minutes away by mode zero flank, yet they didn't want to disengage, she had the ships continue firing on the Syndicate fleet from a position where the ships couldn't protect themselves from both the GRAF cannons and the stellar collectors, couldn't break line of sight with both, forcing them to decide which way they were going to die. The logical solution to that was to send ships to destroy the collectors as the main fleet moved attack the KMS ships, and keep their ships moving at evasive high speed until the collectors were knocked out, given the collectors were not easy to aim due to the fact that they had to lead the target. That was something that the enemy commanders quickly figured out, so the enemy fleet turned to charge the advance element. And where Lorna was brilliant was that she had the ships continue to fire on the advancing fleet, which was doing a good job evading the stellar collector fire, right until they were nearly in range of missile barrages, and then she had them retreat using mode two *just enough* to give them time to fire another shot with their GRAF cannons. And as soon as the cannons fired, they did it again, retreating using mode two about 100,000 kathra, a mode two jump of only a brief moment, which gave their GRAF cannons enough time to charge and fire before the enemy could get close enough to launch missiles. The KMS and Hrathrari escorts could easily keep pace with the

command ships and would be there to protect the ships if the maneuver failed to work.

Lorna was baiting the enemy fleet into chasing ships they would never catch, pulling them further and further away from the planet and shipyard and their orbital defenses! It was a brilliant tactic!

A tactic the enemy commander seemed to understand after the fourth time the ships retreated out of their reach. The enemy fleet turned around and retreated back towards the planet and shipyard...but then chasing the command ships had left the orbital systems exposed, and Lorna took advantage of it. KMS frigates decloaked all around the planet and attacked the orbital weapon platforms with particle beams and cased plasma torpedoes, taking a huge bite out of the planet's defenses before the enemy fleet could do anything about it. The frigates struck from complete surprise and destroyed their targets before most of them could even fire at them, and the few that did mostly either missed, used Torsion weapons that did nothing, or fired missiles that the frigate could outrun as it waited for the CMS to recharge so they could cloak. Only one frigate was hit hard enough to do anything to it, blowing a pretty big hole out of its port bow that must have disabled its particle beam, but the ship turned toward deep space and engaged the translight drive and escaped at FTL speed before a follow-up shot could disable or destroy it.

Again, Jason felt utterly justified in the entire translight program after seeing them used in combat that way. They added an entirely new dimension to naval warfare and afforded his ships a very fast way to escape if necessary.

"Lorna already has them outmaneuvered," Kraal noted professionally. "She's split the fleet from their orbital defenses, and that allowed the frigates to slip in behind them and take them out."

"She commands the CCM for a reason, Kraal," Jason said proudly. She *was* his aunt, after all. "When does the evacuation begin?"

"It should have just begun," Miaari answered. "They were supposed to start bringing Dreamers down into the tunnels as soon as the fleet engaged. Given how many of them there are, it's going to take at least two hours to evacuate them all. Lorna has to hold their attention long enough to get them

at least down into the staging caverns, which are both very deep and shielded by SCM. If they do it right, the Syndicate will have no idea where the Dreamers went.”

He looked to another holo, showing an infiltrator’s minicam catching the first of the solar collector strikes on an Oracle facility. This one was located at U3B-71, one of their major intelligence centers with the entire planet devoted to the intelligence community, and the camera caught the collector beam lancing in from the heavens and striking the large, imposing building holding the Oracle and the analysts that worked with the predictions the Oracle made. The building vanished in the blink of an eye, consumed by the blazing light of the collector beam, and then a massive explosion detonated where the beam’s edge struck the ground, the explosive ejection of earth and rock caused by the flash-vaporization of the matter within the beam. A massive shockwave of fire blasted away from the impact point, moving faster than the speed of sound, and in barely a second, the camera’s image winked out as it was struck by the shockwave.

“By the Denmother,” Kraal said grimly. “I knew the stellar collectors were powerful, but to see one used against a ground target...” he trailed off.

“Maybe now you understand why I’ve said that the collectors may have been the greatest weapon 3D ever invented,” Jason said soberly. “They’re the most powerful weapon we’ve ever devised for how cheap they are to build and how power efficient they are. That explosion was produced by a singularity plant about the size of the power plant in your skimmer.”

“Truly,” he agreed with a slow nod. “And it seems that the Oracle did not warn the Syndicate about that strike.”

“Oracles can’t foresee their own deaths,” Jason reminded him. “It’s a limitation in their power, and one we’re exploiting. I just wish we didn’t have to kill them,” he sighed.

“We must, Jason. And at least this way, it is over before the Oracle even knows what happened. It is a merciful death,” Miaari told him.

“I know. I’m going to convince Denmother to give several medals to the Kimdori that broke into the Oracle database on E Chaio and managed to get their locations,” he said.

“Oh, I’ve already done so, cousin,” Kraal said proudly. Those Kimdori were from Kraal’s clan, and their success would increase the prestige of his clan.

Jason went back to the original holo to see that the Syndicate fleet had returned to the planet, but it was too late. The frigates had already destroyed over half of the orbital defenses, prioritizing the most dangerous ones, and had already retreated and cloaked, hiding them from Syndicate sensors. The fleet moved past the planet and broke line of sight with the command ships and continued to move, which allowed them to evade the collector fire coming in at them from the star. The first Syndicate ships sent after the collectors managed to reach their targets—even if the collector was protected by CMS, the beam it generated was easy enough to follow back to the source—but found themselves besieged by automated 3D weaponry set to defend the collectors. The first ships to reach collector positions were destroyed by mines or other toys, which was a major deviation from the usual tactic the CCM employed by using collectors as expendable assets, self-destructing when the enemy got too close to them. For the first time, the ships sent to destroy collectors encountered defense around them, and they weren’t ready for it. That allowed the collectors to continue firing, making it harder for the main Syndicate fleet to maneuver, keeping them effectively in a fully defensive posture until the main body of the CCM fleet arrived.

And that was when the tactics changed. The CCM fleet came screaming into the theatre in two separate large formations at flank speed from two sides. It pinned the fleet in at the planet, the only direction from which they were not being attacked. And that was when things slowed down. The fleet formed a perimeter, boxing the Syndicate in, but they didn’t swarm forward to attack. They simply held position and allowed the command ships to continue firing their GRAF cannons, slowly whittling down the enemy fleet by destroying its super-ships.

It was again a wise tactic. The CCM fleet was there to stall, to hold the enemy’s attention while the covert team evacuated the Dreamers and doing what they were doing did just that without looking out of place. They didn’t look like they were stalling, they looked like they were chopping down the Syndicate from outside of their range to respond, which was only smart.

The Syndicate fleet was trapped, and they knew they only had one option. The entire fleet turned and accelerated towards the closest formation of CCM ships with the intent of getting within the formations to prevent the use of GRAF cannons or collectors, else the shots would threaten the CCM's own ships.

He looked back at the holo showing the Oracle operations and saw that the recovery operations had begun. They would attack the Oracles within super-ships first, since they had to use nexus bridges to get in, and luckily for them there were only 24 of them left. There were barely 200 Oracles total, and most of them were kept on planet-side facilities where they were kept safe. Each major fleet flagship, the mind-bogglingly gigantic beasts the size of planetoids, had an Oracle on it, and there were only 33 of them—32 since the CCM captured Sha Ra's ship. Seven Oracles had already been recovered from those ships in prior operations and had not been replaced due to the Syndicate not being sure if it was safe to do so. Thanks to Kimdori infiltrators disabling cameras and setting up SCM at the arrival points on the super-ships before the recovery teams bridged in, and leaving behind antimatter bombs to eradicate all evidence of their operation, the Syndicate had no idea how the CCM was getting on and off the ships. They seriously believed that the CCM had some sort of teleportation technology, like transporters from *Star Trek*.

Which wasn't far from the truth, to be honest about it.

They watched for another moment, and then they got back to what they were there to do. Jason learned the changes in the plan and memorized all the details, which would have him getting out there in a small one-man submersible, which he would pilot right into the landing bay of the frigate when he reached the rendezvous point. The submersible was hidden deep under the artificial ground along the coast about 30 kathra from the capitol complex, which he would reach through a series of abandoned tunnels and service passages that ran from the capitol area all the way there. He could reach it without coming close enough to the surface for their sensor net to easily locate him.

When they looked again at the operation holos, he saw that only six Oracles on the super-ships remained, but not all of them had been successfully recovered. Three had been killed by the kill machines before

the extraction teams could reach them, two more had been killed in the firefight after the teams pulled them from their rooms, and one more had died when the boarding party was repelled and forced to retreat, killed by the antimatter bomb the team set immediately upon entering the ship. And it pained him to see that, pained him to think of how close those Oracles were to freedom, only to die all but within sight of their goal. But this wasn't a fairy tale. This was the real world, and in the real world, innocent people died. People who didn't deserve it died. Sometimes the villain won, as the fact to which that the Syndicate controlled most of Andromeda attested.

The real world was not fair.

They had done the best they could with the information the Kimdori brought them, often at great personal risk, and despite that, despite months of planning and practice and training, six Oracles did not make it. And they weren't the only casualties. So far, 27 Marines had been killed in the extraction operations, their bodies and all their gear atomized by the antimatter bombs left behind...and barely a quarter of the operations had begun. There would be more fatalities, many more, when the strike teams started attacking the planetside facilities holding Oracles spread through Syndicate territory, and not just the Marines. Given that part of the operations would be to blow up the facilities holding the Oracles, both to send a message and destroy any tech a fallen Marine may leave behind, there were going to be *hundreds of thousands* of civilian fatalities by the end of it.

He hated it. But it had to be done.

By the time they finished the briefing, after Jason had learned all the changes to the plan and felt he was fully prepared, the last of the ship extraction operations ended in failure, because it never began. By then, the Syndicate's military HQ had enough information to work out what was going on, and they'd ordered the immediate execution of *all Oracles*. And the Kimdori confirmed it, much to Jason's growing anger. Every single remaining Oracle in Syndicate custody was executed within two minutes of the order coming down, including all the ones in the planetside facilities that had yet to be attacked. The Syndicate had killed them, had killed them all, to prevent the CCM from rescuing them.

That was just another tally on the scoresheet for keeping the Syndicate locked in their cage.

Clearly, they had the idea to use the Dreamers they had on V3ÄE-31 to find new Oracles, and in a dark way, he could see why they did it. The war with the Consortium was won, and the Confederation was in another galaxy, wasn't as much of an existential threat to the Syndicate that the Consortium had been. They must have felt confident that they could find new Oracles before the war with the Confederation reached a point where they would need Oracles to direct the movements of the fleet to achieve victory. After all, it didn't take a precognate to predict that two million ships all hitting the same target was going to wipe it out. And that was really all they had to do, send their fleet to the Milky Way and break it into four 500,000 ship mega-fleets, then have them just move from system to system and eradicate all life they found there. It would take years, decades to win a war conducted like that, but they weren't sending the fleet for strategic capture of resources. They were sending them as revenge for the personal insult to the Board, and that meant they would have orders to burn the entire Milky Way to the ground. They must have seen that it was an acceptable short-term sacrifice to keep the Confederation from taking the Oracles, because they'd eventually have more Oracles.

He leaned back in his chair, swallowing that bitter pill. He had failed Aria's brothers and sisters. He had intended to get them out of there, give them a life away from that horror, but he had failed. They were all dead. They had only recovered 17 of the 118 Oracles remaining in Syndicate control.

Seventeen. That meant that one hundred and one tortured children died without ever knowing anything else, had died in terror and fear and pain.

He put Myri up on a hologram. "Have the frigates destroy all Oracle facilities immediately," he commanded. "Have the last strike team enter the Syndicate super-ship and set the antimatter bomb. Destroy the bodies."

She gave him a somber look. "I'll send it down right now, Jayce," she nodded.

Moments later, they watched several holos as his orders were carried out. Holo after holo showed immense explosions as the frigates launched

cased plasma torpedoes set for the minimum possible yield on the facilities that held the Oracles, obliterating them and everything around them for a couple of city blocks. The fireballs rose high over the megabuildings surrounding the facilities, where the infiltrators had set up the surveillance cameras.

The Oracle operation had ended mostly in failure, so he checked the Dreamer operation...and that was much better news. All the Dreamers had been evacuated into the underground bunker and were being evacuated as fast as they could run through the nexus bridge portal. Only one could be open at a time, so they were being sent through in groups four minutes at a time, then they paused and waited for the next bridge to open and continued. The Makati tunnelers were directing the evacuation and were doing it with typical Makati organization and efficiency. They'd evacuated nearly half of the Dreamers, and if they held to the schedule and nothing went wrong, they'd finish in about 33 minutes. They were sending through nearly 200 Dreamers per minute thanks to having everything highly organized and having them all right there.

33 minutes. The naval operation wouldn't be finished in 33 minutes, which was what Lorna was aiming for. She didn't want to have to send ground forces to maintain the illusion that they were pressing the assault, she wanted the Dreamers off the moon before the Navy completely cleared all resistance from space. She was accomplishing that by having the CCM appear to mass up for a ground attack where the remaining Syndicate defense forces could see it. Whales and infantry mech jumpers were starting to pour into the theatre, massing up behind the protective screen of the CCM line vessels as the remaining stellar collectors were destroying the orbital defense platforms as they orbited around the planet and came into line of sight without the collector beam hitting the planet itself. The *Iyaneri* and *Pegasus* were doing the same thing, maneuvering around the planet to get a line on their targets so they could destroy them with their GRAF cannons without hitting the planet, so from the Syndicate's point of view, the CCM was taking its time destroying the last of the orbital defenses as they massed their ground forces and prepared to invade the planet.

It was expertly concealed stalling for time.

The three of them watched in growing anxiety as the counter of remaining Dreamers dwindled lower and lower, then hit the triple digits, as the CCM fleet destroyed the last of the orbital platforms and the fleet began to change its formation, the infantry ships surrounded by the line vessels in a formation clearly appearing to be a protective formation to get the landers into orbit safely.

But they didn't advance. Jason gave a sigh of relief as the last group of Dreamers started running through the portal, and behind them, a Makati tunneler set the timer on an antimatter bomb more than powerful enough to wipe out the entire concentration camp and most of the surrounding base. The last Dreamer went through, and the tunneler activated the countdown timer as the Makati evacuated through the nexus bridge, until only the bomb-setter was left. He picked up a large backpack, nearly as big as he was, and himself ran through the nexus bridge, which closed behind him.

It was done. The Dreamers and the Makati team were safely off the planet, leaving nothing behind but the discarded possessions of the Dreamers and the equipment the tunnelers had to leave behind, such as the SCM pods, the beacons, and the observation camera.

And with their successful evacuation, the objective of the CCM's presence in Andromeda had been achieved. The Dreamers were removed from the custody of the Syndicate. They had no more Oracles, they had no more Dreamers to breed more Oracles. The enemy's "I win" button had been taken away from them, and it was Jason's hope that the loss of that supposed guarantee of victory would cause the Syndicate to adhere to a peace treaty.

All that remained was securing that peace treaty. Jason would try to get one tomorrow, but if he failed, then he was sure that they would have one by the end of the month.

In unison, the CCM fleet turned from the planet and accelerated to flank, retreating from the planet and heading out to jump distance. Seconds after they started that maneuver, a massive antimatter explosion on the planet's surface completely destroyed the military base where the Dreamers had been held, making it look to the Syndicate that the CCM had wiped out the remaining Dreamers.

But that was it. The objective of the war in Andromeda had been achieved, so the CCM would jump back to Prakka and start the withdrawal operation, returning back home. The Karinnes and Kimdori were going to keep Prakka as a forward listening post, keeping an eye on the Syndicate, and that would be the only CCM presence left in Andromeda. And Jason had prepared for this, since it was the Karinnes that set up the forward bases on Prakka's moons. All the buildings, all the materials, all the permanent equipment, they belonged to the Karinnes.

"It's over," Miaari declared.

"Yup. All we need now is the peace treaty," Jason agreed.

They went over a few final details, and then they ended the meeting. By then the kids were home, and that was the perfect way to spend this last night before the meeting with the Board, surrounded by the very reasons he was undertaking this dangerous mission. His children, his family, they were *everything*. He was willing to do this to protect his children, to save them from having to grow up in the midst of the most horrific kind of war the Syndicate wanted to wage, a war of basic survival against an enemy that wanted nothing less than their complete annihilation...over *being insulted*.

He came downstairs and swooped down on Bethany as she played with toys in the living room, picking her up and holding her over his head as she giggled, then settled her in his arms as he walked into the kitchen. "Alright, I'm all done," he declared. "What's for dinner?"

"Barbecued chicken," Ayama answered as she and Seido chopped vegetables at the island. Surin wasn't in the kitchen...probably tending to Sanjira.

"Good, because I'm beyond hungry. Parri food is delicious and filling, but I'm about ready for food that I can easily identify."

"How did things go there?" Seido asked.

"Very well," he answered. "I'm completely ready for tomorrow's mission, and thanks to them, I'm certain I'll be coming home from it." He tickled Bethany's belly with his free hand, making her giggle and squirm a bit. "That gives me the rest of the day to spend with these little cuties."

“The others decided to have a community dinner on the deck,” Ayama told him. “Something of a good luck party.”

“Oh, so the chicken is our contribution,” Jason realized.

“That and some *miji*,” Seido added, pointing at the chopped vegetables on the cutting board before her. “*Ojipa* style.”

“I’ll pretend that I know what that means,” Jason said, which made Ayama give him a bit of a smile. “All I really know is that I like *miji*, so we’ll leave it there.” *Miji* was a Shio dish best described as a salad on steroids. It was cooked strips of some meat from Shio Prime served on a bed of chopped vegetables and drizzled with a hearty sauce. The vegetables they used weren’t like lettuce. There were six different ones used and each was surprisingly spicy or flavorful, and their flavor combined with the meat and sauce to produce something delicious. “Now, where’s your sister, baby girl?”

“She’s up in the nursery. Jyslin is with the babies,” Ayama answered.

[I’m done with the meetings, love,] Jason communed. [I have the rest of the day to myself.]

[Miaari told me,] she answered. [I’ll be down in a bit. Jon’s being his usual fussy self. Dahnai is on her way over with her family.]

[She must have heard about the barbecue.]

[She suggested it,] Jyslin answered. [After everything you’ve gone through the last couple of takirs, love, we all want you to just sit back and relax before tomorrow. And you do love a good cookout with friends and family.]

[I do indeed,] he agreed, noisily kissing his daughter’s cheek, making her giggle and squirm a little bit.

Barely an hour later, he certainly felt completely relaxed, wearing only a pair of swim trunks and sitting on an outdoor lounge on the large deck attached to the house that overlooked the beach as friends and family moved about around him and chatted, while the kids ran around having fun. Community barbecues were something of a regular thing on the strip, where they all came over to Jason’s deck and enjoyed some grilled food and good conversation, reinforcing the powerful social bonds that made them feel

more like a big family than a neighborhood. It wasn't limited to just the strip, since quite a few Generations and upper level government officials lived within walking distance of the strip, and they often attended these parties.

The strip had a new resident since the last barbecue, Jenn, but that didn't really change anything. Jenn had moved into Meya's house, which was in reality her and Myra's house since it was a single very large house but inside was more like a duplex, sharing a living room, dining room, kitchen, and home gym, with two wings holding the private apartments of the twins. That demonstrated that Faey twin need to stay together even into adulthood. Lyn and Bryn were the extreme, twins that still lived together and did everything together, deeply intertwined to where they were virtually a single being inhabiting two bodies, where Meya and Myra were in the middle of the scale, still living very close to each other and sharing aspects of each other's lives, but maintaining their own personal space.

It wasn't entirely incorrect to say that Jenn had married more than one woman. In Faey society, marrying a twin often came with the understanding that it was a two for one deal, and Jenn would have to share parts of his personal life with Myra. Lyn and Bryn were the ultimate example of that. When they got married, they'd virtually both be marrying the same man, and the man in their lives would be living with both of them, would in effect be married to both of them. Faey law even acknowledged the situation. Polygamy was illegal in Faey law, but when it came to twins, on the official licenses and permits, the first name of the twin was deliberately omitted, using only the surname. That was on top of special legal status for twins in Faey law where the twins were considered a single legal entity when it came to things like taxes, property ownership, and just about anything where a single person could make a legal claim or case. It was almost like an alternative form of marriage.

He often wondered where Bethany and Siyae were going to fall in that, or even Jon and Julia. It wasn't just identical twins that were deeply intertwined, it was twins in general, who grew up together and shared all aspects of their lives with each other. Even in a house like his, filled with kids, the twins would spend more time with each other than with their siblings. In a way, it made him almost jealous of his kids, who would grow up with siblings, with friends, where he had been an only child whose

father's job meant he moved too much to form the kind of deep, lasting bonds they could. Military brats lived in the moment, knowing that the friends they made today may be gone tomorrow, so they supported each other without getting *too* close. His kids wouldn't have to deal with that. They would grow up in this house, know only one home, grow up with friends and family, and want for nothing.

Including kids that weren't his, but he considered his just out of principle. When Dahnai arrived, he had Reli on his lap, tormenting Bryn's daughter a little bit as her sister Rini cuddled a juvenile tabi, Marra...which she called Ma-Ma. Every household on the strip had at least one tabi now, which Aya had more or less arranged to put furry little guardians in every house on the strip. Marra wasn't Bryn's, she was actually Aura's tabi that had wandered over from her house, and just one of three pets Aura had. Aura liked animals, so she had three different pets, the other two being a Shio *bii-bii*, which was a small canine that looked like a cross between a miniature pinscher and a Pomeranian, and the other a Velarian rock bat, which were very popular pets due to their very affectionate natures and exceeding cuteness. They looked very similar to Terran flying foxes, which were utterly adorable, and were slightly larger, which made them pretty big animals. Unlike Terran bats, Velarian rock bats weren't nocturnal, and they also didn't hang upside-down. They walked on their wings and legs akin to the CGI dragon Smaug from the *Hobbit* movie, folding their wings enough to use them as limbs to walk around, and able to climb almost anything to get to a perch to take off thanks to the claws on their feet and the fact that they had two fingers and an opposable thumb on their wings, which allowed them to grip things on top of having claws for traction. They had seven "fingers," three of which turned their wings to hand-like appendages capable of manipulating objects and the other four forming the elongated bones on which their wing membranes anchored. Those membranes folded back against the forearm when not spread, extending up over the bat's shoulders when it was walking on all fours. They had an instinctive den impulse that made them choose a den and stay in it, which meant that they didn't fly off and get lost. Aura could let it out and fly around, and it always came home because home was den, and rock bats didn't leave their chosen den unless forced.

[I take it you're all done with the Parri?] Dahnai asked as she came up onto the deck carrying Kaen, Kellin, Sirri, and Maer standing at her side, and with Saelle and Evin behind her with Raisha and Miyai. She brought the whole family...and Saelle and Evin were all but part of her family now. Saelle and Dahnai were as close as sisters, even more so now that Dahnai was a Generation, and Dahnai had learned that the easiest way to adhere to Imperial custom yet still be around her children was to simply drag Saelle with her everywhere she went. Dahnai almost never appeared anywhere without Saelle in tow, a fact that many in the *Siann* had noticed.

[I'm ready,] he answered. *[With luck, I'll leave tomorrow morning and be back tomorrow night.]*

[You'd better,] she retorted, her thought threaded with concern and worry and fear.

[I'm confident in our plan, love,] he soothed. *[The Kimdori have every possibility covered. All I have to do is get out of the building, and what Mrar taught me will get me out of that building. I can just walk right through it and nothing can touch me.]*

[You mastered the phasing trick?]

[Yes I did,] he answered with a smile and a nod. *[When I'm shifted into a quantum phase, I'm absolutely untouchable by anything that doesn't match my phase. I can literally walk right through the guards and right through the walls. So, I will get out of that building alive, love,]* he promised adamantly.

[Aris' sweet mercy, that makes me feel so much better,] she communed, leaning down and sliding her hand along his face. He smiled up at her and patted her hand before she pulled it away, which made her smile.

Dahnai effortlessly submerged herself into the party after that exchange, which never failed to make Jason feel better about things. Dahnai had a lot of friends, honest, sincere friends, among the strip girls and the Generations that lived around the strip, and he always felt it was good for her to be surrounded by people that honestly cared for her. It said a lot both in how Dahnai had changed since Jason had met her, becoming more open and more willing to make friends, and how they had accepted someone of Dahnai's political stature among them without expecting favors...though

just about everyone around the strip was used to galactic rulers given how often Zaa, Kreel, and Krirara were there.

And as if thinking about Kreel summoned him by magic, he burst onto the scene from the walkway leading to the landing pad, and he wasn't alone. Zaa, Krirara, Enva, Sk'Vrae, Observer A, and Brayrak Kruu were with him, which was quite an interesting mix. "Hey now, I heard there was a barbecue going on here!" he shouted, getting everyone's attention. "Put the sugar chutes on the grill, Seido! I'm hungry!"

"Are you crashing my party, Kreel?" Jason asked loudly.

"Of course I am, you dink! That's the best way to show up at a party!"

Observer A came up to the table and gave Jason a bit of a contrite look. "We do apologize for coming unannounced, but Kreel insisted," he said, demonstrating his Ruu manners.

"That's alright, A, there's plenty of food," he replied. "I can live with this group from the council. Now if Anavan was with you, I'd have tossed your butt right out."

He couldn't help but chuckle.

He was honest enough about that. These rulers were either his closest friends on the council or his most trusted allies, and he never minded having them around. Everyone but Observer A was well versed in these very informal affairs and had little trouble mingling, even Brayrak Kruu—actually, he was quite a popular fellow on Karis with quite a few of his own friends—and they knew that politics weren't discussed at these gatherings until well after everyone had plenty of time to eat and have fun. So, Observer A found himself in a purely social situation, and he managed to handle himself fairly well. Ruu were a lot more social than most on council realized, nowhere near as stuffy and proper, which Jason had learned working with RDX. Some of the pranks she pulled on the others at Project G were pretty epic, showing both a great deal of imaginative creativity and outright fiendishness...to the point where several in 3D wanted RDX to be brought in. RDX was exactly the kind of person they wanted in 3D, someone smart, creative, and absolutely diabolical.

By the time things settled down and the rulers gathered at a table overlooking the beach to discuss tomorrow's mission, Observer A had

managed to make quite a few friends among Jason's family, friends, and neighbors. Jason went over the mission with them and stressed that his work with Mrar and the Parri had prepared him very well for his part of it. "Thanks to the Pai, I'll be able to literally walk right through the walls, so I'm going to get out of that building alive," he surmised for them. "Once I'm out, it all comes down to the plan the Kimdori worked up, which is very thorough. I'll know exactly what to do no matter what happens, that's how deeply they've planned this out. They've planned out sixteen different ways to get me off the planet, and each one doesn't rely on any of the others. If my preferred escape route is blocked, I can choose the best alternative based on the current conditions and fall back on it."

"I had no idea that the Pai could do anything like that," Shakizarr breathed.

"Not all of them, only the Masters," Jason told him. "And luckily I'm strong enough to do the trick...just not for too long. If I stay like that more than maybe a minute, I'll have such a nosebleed that I might pass out from blood loss."

"Even with your gestalt?" Kreel asked, reaching over and tapping his forearm.

"I don't think I could even do it without my gestalt," he admitted. "Remember, Kreel, Mrar is naturally stronger than I am. Like *way* stronger. I need the gestalt to do a lot of what she taught me."

"Then I suppose it's a good thing that both the Pai and the Muri have officially petitioned for entry into the Confederation," Sk'Vrae mused. "I'd rather be allied to beings with that kind of power than opposed to them."

"Truth," Kreel nodded. "Technology schmechnology, the Pai are nasty all by themselves."

"When did they do that?" Jason asked in surprise.

"Two days ago," she answered. "The vote is scheduled for tomorrow. We plan to be in session the entire time you are on the mission," she added. "We want to be available in case any decisions need to be made."

"And we'll be here," Shakizarr added, pointing down at the tabletop. "Many of us in person, at least those of us that can survive on Karis

unaided. We're just the first to arrive and heard about this gathering. So Kreel convinced us to crash it," he chuckled.

"Well, this is news to me," Jason said lightly. "Just calling a summit without my approval now, eh?"

"We do have that power, Jason," Sk'Vrae told him a bit cheekily, then she gave him a fanged smile when he turned a dirty look in her direction.

"The main reason we're doing it is because we want to observe the mission using the micro-cams being incorporated into your robes, and Cybi said it was best if it was done from Karis," Enva told him. "She said that she can keep in contact with them even with them being in Andromeda."

"We installed a biogenic comm array at Prakka, it gives Cybi coverage over the entire galaxy," he said absently. "Actually, it gives her coverage over the entire far side of the galactic cluster, it's one of the hardcore arrays like the one we have here. The one here gives us range to 56 of the 83 galactic formations in the cluster, including everything on our side of the cluster, and the one at Prakka gives us access to the rest of them."

"So, we have comm access to the entire cluster," Krirara noted.

"We do now," Jason nodded. "The new array was only put up a few days ago. That kind of array takes a while to build, and we can't just pre-produce it and keep it in storage."

"Why not?"

"Because of how much Terynium is in it," he answered. "Terynium decays in normal space, and the more of it you have, the faster it decays. It reacts to itself and accelerates the decay. So an array that size has to be made when it's needed, and the Terynium core that forms the antenna will have to be replaced about every fifteen years."

"That's a lot of material," A said, looking over at him. "How do you prevent the radiative cascade effect?"

"You have to keep the density lighter than 3.3577," he answered.

"Ah. That's how we do it, too," A nodded.

"You have this Terynium?" Enva asked A.

“As in, you know what the heck it is?” Kreel asked cheekily.

“Of course. We don’t call it Terynium, though, we call it Hestrium,” he answered. “It’s a hyperspace material that forms the basis of our hyperspace application technologies, since the substance exists as a real object in both normal space and hyperspace. It refines to something with the appearance and consistency of a soft metal, like lead or gold, and it’s not dangerous or toxic to living things. It can be handled safely with bare hands, at least for short periods of time. It can cause frostbite if held for too long, the natural ambient temperature of the substance is low enough to cause frostbite with extended exposure. Handling Hestrium is similar to handling metal put in a freezer. It’s the core of our hyperspace comm antennas and hyperspace jump engines. Any device or system that deals with hyperspace has Hestrium involved somewhere in its construction.”

Jason was honestly surprised Observer A would reveal that much about Ruu technology to outsiders.

“So, you’d better not do anything stupid crazy, Jayce, we’ll be watching,” Kreel grinned. “And I think there’s a few people at this table that will beat you senseless when you get home if you do.”

“You got that right,” Dahnai said aggressively, which caused some laughter. “But I gotta say, I’m feeling much better about this since Mrar taught you that phasing trick.”

“You’re not the only one,” he nodded. “She said it was the one thing she wanted me to learn, the best technique I could learn in the time I had to train, and she was right. With that trick, I can completely protect myself, at least for short periods of time. And I’ll use that time to get my ass out of danger.”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to hear, Jason,” Enva said. “I’m very worried about you.”

“I appreciate your concern, Enva,” he said honestly. “But I’m confident I’ll be fine. Mrar and the Parri prepared me well for my role in the mission, and the Kimdori have a very good plan to get me off the planet alive.”

“You better come back, council will be boring as sin without you there,” Kreel joked.

They went over a lot of what Jason expected to happen tomorrow, discussing possible curve balls the Board might throw at him, but he ended up blowing off the serious talk to do what he was here to do, spend time with his children and family before his mission, to remind him exactly who was counting on him to not lose his temper and come back home. He spent most of the afternoon just being Dad, trying not to think too much about tomorrow while also using every moment to remind him of what tomorrow was all about. Protecting his children from a lifetime of war, saving as many lives as he could...and all he had to do was not lose his temper, to not give in to the hate that had started him down this path. What he had started in hate, he would finish out of love...not for the Board, but for his children, his wife and *amu*, his friends, his people. If he allowed, his love for them would guide him tomorrow, the *shaman* had told him, then he would leave E Chaio a better place, and leave a better man.

By sunset, the party had wound down, the rulers had gone to rest at hotels—except Kreel, Krirara, and Zaa, his friends were staying at the house as usual and Zaa was at her house in Jaxtra—leaving him with the three women that meant the most to him. He walked along the beach with an arm around Jyslin, holding Dahnai's hand, and with Symone clinging to his back piggyback style, her arms thrown over his shoulders and her legs wrapped around his waist. Sometimes it amazed him, even now, that he was in love with three women, nearly as much as he was that the three women involved didn't mind at all. *You will be careful, won't you baby?* Symone asked, sending so that only the four of them had any hope to hear it.

Of course I will, love, he answered. *I know this is dangerous, but I have a good feeling about it. I'm doing the right thing, I know it.*

And did the Parri tell you that? Dahnai nearly accused.

No. There are some times you just have to listen to your instincts, and mine are telling me that this is the best course of action. I appreciate your concern, but don't worry too much. There's nobody on the council more qualified for this mission than me, mainly because only about five of us have any kind of actual combat experience.

Who else would have that kind of resume? Symone asked.

Grran for one. Remember that he rose to power through the military, he answered. He started as a gunner's mate in the Navy, and he fought in several battles against Kypan pirates, both as a sailor and as a ship captain. And don't forget, he commanded a Jobodi battleship personally during the Second Battle of Karis, so his neck was very much on the line. Sk'Vrae's pretty nasty in a fight, to which Dahnai can attest, he noted, which made her both bristle and shiver a bit. Shevatt served five years in the Ogravian Navy as the Crown Prince, it's traditional, and he was on a ship that saw action during the Ogravian-Verutan Incident in 4377. They call it the Two Cycle War, it was all a big accident and misunderstanding, but they did shoot at each other.

How can you accidentally get into a war?

Each side thought the other was responsible for a border incursion, he answered. The whole thing was because of a single malfunctioning long range sensor. And it just goes to show you how quickly things can go to hell when you're not friends with the people who share your border. He looked pointedly at Dahnai.

Hey, we were fighting the Skaa over the Medalides systems before I took the throne. Blame my mother for that, she challenged.

While Shakizarr's never fought in an actual battle, he's been trained for it, both as a tactician and as a warrior. Shakizarr might be the most dangerous member of the council in a hand to hand fight...outside of Sk'Vrae and Jokik, anyway, he chuckled. Urumi were just fucking evolved for close quarters combat with their dermal plates and venom, and Jokik could just stomp someone, or set their hair on fire. It's an ancient tradition for the Grand Emperor of the Verutans to be the most skilled fighter in his army, even if he's the last man that would ever fight. It's a tradition that goes all the way back to when their kings did fight with their armies. Quord would be dangerous for the same reason. Every member of the Senate is a former military officer, military service is a requirement to enter politics. Quord may be a politician now, but in his day, he was a brilliant military tactician and one of the Jun Navy's most respected Admirals. That's most likely why he's Prime Senator now. That kind of respect transfers to politics in Jun society.

But none of them can do what you can do, baby, Symone said, reaching down and grabbing hold of his forearm. These are gonna let you wipe the floor with those Benga assholes.

I won't be there to fight, love. I'm expecting one, but I'm going to try to avoid one if at all possible. If the Oracles foresaw what would happen if they piss me off, they might kill me before I even get into the room. So I have to keep my emotions out of it, and remember that this plan isn't going to work if I walk into that room with the intent to kill the Board. But if it comes down to a fight, I'll be ready. My rigger training will serve me well, and with what I've learned from Mrar, I feel good about my chances. I will come home to my children, and I will come home to you.

You'd better, Jason, Jyslin sent without humor, her worry bleeding through her thought as she put her head on his shoulder. You are my life. Without you, it will have no meaning.

He stopped them, then sat on the sand just above the furthest reach of the waves, and they all clustered around him. Jyslin on his right, Dahnai on his left, arms around them, and Symone again behind him, arms over his shoulders. *I know you hate this. All of you, he sent earnestly. But know that I do this for you. For you, for our children, for our friends. I will take this risk to stop this war before it comes to our galaxy and millions die, before it threatens those we hold most dear, before it becomes a nightmare that haunts us all until our dying day. I love you all, so much that I would risk my life to keep you safe, he told them.*

That's not your job, baby. That's our job, Symone told him.

Welcome to the wrong side of the equal rights movement, Symone, he told her, which made her both chuckle a bit and slap his chest with her open palm. Tomorrow, I need all three of you to think of me. Pray for me, he told them. I'll need your love and support to get through this. Just knowing that you are thinking of me will keep my head where it's supposed to be and keep my temper from getting out of control. You three are my guardian angels, the mothers of my children, and I will need your love in my heart to give me the courage to stand before the Board without killing them all in a fury. Tomorrow, I will need to be the best I can be, and I can never be the best of who I am without you. Without you, all of you, I would be far less than I am today. You give me strength. You give me courage. You give me wisdom, and

you give me happiness. You are the foundation upon which my life is built, and without you my house would crumble. Tomorrow, keep me in your thoughts and in your hearts, and the light of your love will light my path and guide me home.

None of them said or sent a word. They just pulled in close to him, hugging him and each other, sharing a moment that needed no explanation. It was a moment of wordless, boundless love, and it made his heart sing to feel it. It brightened his heart, it reassured him, it comforted him. Feeling their love for him, he knew that he had the strength to get through tomorrow without losing his temper and getting himself killed.

He was sure of it.

Chapter 13

Koira, 16 Demaa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Tuesday, 25 March 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Koira, 16 Demaa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

KMS Tianne, Orbiting Prakka 21-C, Andromeda

With deliberate slowness, as if procrastination might change what was coming, Jason allowed Mai and Dera to slide the outer robe of his formal robes over his shoulders. Dera held it in place as Mai started wrapping the red sash around his waist, and he could feel the extra weight of the garment on his shoulders. Even though spiders were microscopic, the fact that there were nearly 16,000,000 of them infused into the fabric of the outer robe, inside the lining between the inner and outer layers, added weight to it. Nearly two konn of weight. The garment was carefully made to carry the spiders but didn't require any special material or shielding to protect them from the ionic field technology the Benga employed to short out weapons carried through a security station.

The reason was surprisingly simple; the spiders themselves had no power supply. Without a battery or power pack, the spiders were too small to be shorted out by the ionic field unless they were powered up, the field just didn't have enough material to interact with to short out the system. The spiders were too *small* to be shorted out by the field. So long as they weren't activated, the tests Myleena ran showed that they could pass through the ionic field without being destroyed. So, so long as they didn't increase the power on the broadcast node to reach the spiders and activate them, the spiders could be carried through an ionic field security station safely.

He let his guards tie his sash, the red sash of a married man, his expression stoic and his thoughts heavy. He was going over the plan, over and over in his mind, making sure that he knew every step of it, so that he always knew where he was going, where to go next, and what his contingency option was if his path was blocked. Kraal and Miaari had designed a highly involved plan that covered virtually any possibility, and gave him 19 separate places to go to get off the planet, from beacons to the frigate that was already on E Chaio and lurking under the waters about 50 kathra offshore. And if all of those failed, he had 15 separate safe locations within 20 kathra of their capitol building where their sensor network couldn't find him, places he could go and hide while they came up with a new plan to get him offworld. He had multiple options, but all of them depended on one thing...him getting out of the building. That was his major responsibility, and what he'd spent most of his time training to prepare to do. All he had to do was get out of the building. Once he did, the plan took over, and it would get him home.

He just had to get out of the building.

Dera smoothed the lapels of the outer robe and then patted them, then she leaned in and kissed him on the cheek gently before she stepped back. He turned and looked at himself in the mirror and saw that the robes looked just like his normal ones, just with a few tiny exceptions. He wasn't wearing his *oye* wood medallion, the one the *shaman* gave him, because there was too much risk he might lose it. He also wasn't wearing his gestalt, because there was too much risk he might lose it. Unlike the tactical built into his arms, a standard gestalt could be taken off of him relatively easily. The robes were new, so they were immaculately clean, arrayed perfectly upon him to look quite nice, and fit him just so. His hair had been cut just before he put on the robes, so it too was neat and orderly.

The one thing that looked different was the face staring back at him. It was wearing such a grim expression that he almost didn't recognize himself.

But there was no reason to avoid this. He was ready, and that meant that it was time to go.

He didn't send, he just looked over to Aya, and gave a single nod. She nodded in return and turned towards the bow of the ship. *The Grand Duke*

is ready to depart, she informed Palla, who was on the bridge.

Understood, she answered, her thought shivering with concern and worry and fear, which was squelched by her discipline. Palla knew what this mission entailed, and she did not like it one bit. But she had her orders, and she had her duty. *We'll be under way in just a moment.*

He had to resist communing with Jyslin back home, with Dahnai, with Symone's interface...with anyone. He'd already said his goodbyes, and he didn't want them here while he prepared for the mission, fearing that they would distract him. All he could do was sigh and step away from the mirror, sliding his hands into his sleeves and grabbing the little straps sewn into them so he could completely cover the skin of his hands and arms with the blue material of his robe. He walked over to a window in the executive stateroom and watched as the gas giant started to slowly rotate out of view, as the ship turned and prepared to depart for the rendezvous point. That point was four sectors away from E Chaio, where the *Tianne* would launch the jump-capable civilian transport that would complete the journey utilizing a hyperspace catapult to get the ship there in real time, which was already in position and hidden by Kimdori SCM. That transport was a Kirri ship, one of their jump-capable civilian passenger ships, and was chosen specifically because it carried no technology the Syndicate could capture. Its engines weren't even real-time jump engines. When it jumped out, it would suffer a relativity delay that would cause it to reach its destination in 3,317 years. Its destination was Oasis, in the Strands of Trelle.

That was why the ship would be unmanned. It was effectively an expendable asset, though Myleena was going to track the ship as it entered Flat Space to see how intergalactic space effected its relativity delay, and see how long the ship could stay in hyperspace before the engine failed and it dropped out. So the ship would serve as a scientific experiment once it served its purpose.

He stood at the window for the entire trip to the Stargate, until he had to sit down for the jump restraints. Once they were through the Stargate, the ship turned and almost immediately jumped out in mode two. The ship would cruise in for 37 minutes in mode two to reach the catapult location, which gave Jason more time to think to go over the escape plan, as well as

go over his negotiation points with the Board. He *was* there to negotiate, and if he could get a peace treaty out of them, he would.

It barely seemed like they'd been in hyperspace for two minutes when the ship dropped back into normal space at a location about 60 light years away from E Chaio, dropping into a zone hidden from Syndicate long range sensors by Kimdori SCM. The catapult was already here and waiting, tended by two Kimdori destroyers, and the ship dropped back into normal space oriented so he could see them from the window.

Jason, we're here, Palla informed him. You're clear to depart whenever you're ready.

I'll never be ready, but that's no excuse, he answered reluctantly. Is the catapult active?

Yes.

Alright. He turned and regarded the 12 guards in the room. His usual four, Aya, Mai, Kaera, Hara, Deila, Uma, Lelanna, and Brae, who were often attached to him when four guards weren't enough, so he knew them fairly well. He gave a sigh and stepped up to them, then reached out and took Aya's hands. Yes, I'll be careful, he sent openly to them. And thank you. All of you. For everything that you've done for me and my family. The House of Karinne would not be where it is if it weren't for you, and I consider myself lucky beyond measure to have known you. It's been an honor, my friends.

Don't send like that, Jason, Aya replied, her eyes nearly shimmering. Never accept the inevitable. It simply turns it into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I can't leave this room without telling you how much I love and respect you, girls, he told them, looking at their faces. You and those who couldn't be here with us. You're not just my protectors. You're my advisors, you're my teachers, you're my voice of reason and caution to rein in my wilder notions, and you are my friends. And it comforts me beyond measure to know that if I don't come back, that my family will be in your care. He put his hand on Aya's cheek. May you forever walk in Trelle's garden.

She gave him a look, and a tear formed in the corner of her eye. She knew what it meant for him to say something like that, since he didn't believe in Trelle and considered it a sin against God to invoke her name.

She leaned forward and kissed him gently on the lips, then stepped back. He walked down the line, receiving a kiss from all of them, and when he finished with Kaera, he gave a cleansing breath and stepped past them and out the stateroom hatch. He did not look back.

He could not look back.

As he requested, there was no one in the landing bay to bid him farewell, just two ground crew who gave him a salute with serious expressions as he walked towards the Kirri transport. Like all Kirri designs, it blended practicality with style smoothly, creating an aesthetically pleasing ship with clean lines and elegant, narrow wings for aerodynamic stability when operating in an atmosphere. The transport was the size of a 767 passenger jet, but only had room inside to carry 52 passengers and two pilots because of the size of the jump engines. The engines and other systems took up nearly 90% of the volume of the ship, which made the passenger compartment noticeably cramped. Even the cockpit was cramped, forcing him to fight a bit with his robes to step over the center console between the two cockpit seats and get into the pilot's seat. He settled himself as best he could and strapped in, then he began preflight. The transport was in no way refitted for modern technology, so it had manual controls and a flight stick. He'd downloaded all the necessary data to fly the ship, so he started the engines with confident movements as he pressed the right buttons in the right sequence.

Once the transport was fully up and ready to go, he blew out his breath and activated the gravband comm. "This is Karinne One," he called to the ship's traffic controller. "Preflight complete, ready to depart."

"You are cleared to depart, Karinne One," Palla's voice answered. "May Trelle, Aris, and Demir watch over you."

"Be back soon," he said, then he killed the transmission and picked the transport up off the deck with a gentle shift of the altitude control slide. He turned the ship slowly, getting a feel for how sensitive the stick was in this ship, then he slowly inched his way out of the bay. Once he was clear, he changed course and accelerated, heading for the catapult. He used the time approaching it to double check the pre-programmed jump coordinates, then ensured that the jump engines were charged and ready. "Karinne One ready to jump," he called to the *Tianne*. "Is the catapult ready?"

“Catapult is in active mode and standing by,” Palla answered.

“Alright then, let’s see what this thing can do,” he said as he slowed the ship to a stop within the ring of the catapult, then he took hold of the hyperspace jump control. He gripped it enough to close the handle switch, then he put his thumb on the side button, both of which were required to unlock the control and enable the ship to jump. “Here goes nothing,” he muttered under his breath, then he pulled the control back, which activated the jump engines, and a press of a button on the other side of the console with his other hand caused the ship to jump out of normal space. The view in front of him snapped as if someone pulled at the fabric of space to stretch what he saw away from a fixed point in front of the ship, then there was blur of light as the ship jumped into hyperspace. A quick check of the primary HUD showed him the catapult had worked, he was in a real time jump that would get him to E Chaio in about 44 seconds, so he released the hyperspace jump control and allowed it to return to its original position. He didn’t touch the control stick while the ship was in hyperspace, since the controls were locked out by the computer while executing a jump, and the ship dropped back into normal space on its own, going on the data inputted into the navigation jump computer.

They were already here waiting. A single Syndicate civilian transport was sitting about 400 kathra dead ahead, exactly as negotiated. He took hold of the controls and started the ship forward as he activated the comm to emulate shortrange Syndicate comm. “Syndicate ship, this is Confederation Transport One, requesting docking instructions.”

“Confederation Transport, this is Syndicate Transport. Come alongside our vessel and align your side hatch with ours. It doesn’t matter which side. We’ll extend a docking clamp when your ship is at a full stop.”

“Understood,” he answered.

The Syndicate transport was three times the size of the Kirri transport, so Jason approached it slowly and carefully. He lined up the port hatch with the hatch he saw on their ship, and then a cylindrical force field extended out from the Syndicate ship and touched the hull around the hatch. The ship shivered a little from the contact with the docking force field—a clever use of a hard shield, Jason could admit—and unbuckled his seat restraints. He then enabled the autopilot’s return course, setting it so the ship would

execute its flight plan once the Syndicate ship moved about three kathra away. The exact distance was measured in Kirri *ara*, and converted to about 3.116 kathra, or about 2.8 kilometers or 1.6 miles.

He struggled out of the cockpit, smoothed his robes, and then walked to the hatch. He prepared for a potential trick by putting a telekinetic shield around himself—the ship had no sensors to tell him if the area inside the docking tunnel was pressurized, then he took a deep breath and hit the hatch control. The space in the tube wasn't pressurized, but it was sealed, so there was a rush of air that startled him a tiny bit as the air inside the transport equalized the pressure with the vacuum that had been within the docking tunnel. He had to step down a considerable distance to get his feet down onto the hard shield, and he had to walk carefully towards the transport because the hard shield was as slippery as ice. The far hatch opened, causing another rush of air as the greater pressure inside the Syndicate ship equalized to the tunnel and the Kirri transport, and he saw a Benga female standing at the hatch, wearing a Syndicate Navy uniform. She knelt down and reached out a hand towards him when he reached the far side, since the hatch was almost over his head, and she pulled him up and onto the deck. “Welcome aboard, your Excellency,” the rather attractive female said in Benga, looking down at him. “If you would step into the passenger compartment and take a seat, we can get underway.”

“Thank you,” he replied, stepping inside. The ship was almost completely empty, which surprised him a little bit. There were two Benga guards sitting at the rear of the passenger compartment, and the female was one of two pilots in the cockpit. They'd installed a chair his size for him right by the hatch, and he stepped over to it and sat down after gathering up his robes. “Uh, your Excellency, is there any way you can inform the crew of your ship that they can close the hatch?”

“There's no one in it, madam,” he informed her calmly. “So you can disengage the docking clamp. You won't hurt anyone if that ship decompresses.”

“The ship will remain here?” she asked.

“It will return on autopilot,” he answered with a shake of his head. “Warn your pilot that once he moves far enough away from the ship, the autopilot will engage and the ship will jump out of the system.”

“I’m the pilot, your Excellency,” she smiled. “And I’ll keep that in mind. There is a lavatory in the back of the transport built for species of your size if necessary. A galley holding refreshments is right there, you may help yourself,” she told him, pointing. “The trip to E Chaio will take approximately five divisions, your Excellency.”

“I’m aware, Captain,” he told her respectfully.

He was honestly surprised there weren’t more Benga on the transport, but after just a few minutes, he was justified in his suspicions over how this long trip in was going to go. Both the guards in the back of the transport were telepaths, and he could feel them very delicately, very carefully probing the edges of his consciousness, trying to unobtrusively test his mental defenses. Both of them were very good, very well trained, but Jason was trained by one of the most skilled telepaths alive, so he could detect everything they were doing. Both the Benga woman and her co-pilot were also telepaths, but they weren’t trying to probe him...they were probably telepaths just so he couldn’t eavesdrop on their surface thoughts. They were obviously told not to talk to him, because the two pilots talked only about ship operations as they accelerated to a sublight cruising speed that would get them to E Chaio in about six hours, then they settled into a comfortable silence once the autopilot was engaged.

In all, he was a bit pleasantly surprised. So far, the Benga were adhering to the negotiated plan and were behaving. But he also knew that wasn’t going to last.

He passed the time on the way in not going over the plan but thinking of nothing. He used the meditation techniques the *shaman* taught him to calm him, clear his mind, and focus him on the task at hand. He did so for a simple reason; just in case they had a telepath he couldn’t sense that *could* hear his surface thoughts. This way, he gave away nothing, not even personal information, for there were no thoughts there for a telepath to overhear.

The nice side effect of mediation like that was that he couldn’t really feel the passage of time, so it seemed like it was just a few minutes after he began that he felt the ship start to decelerate, and that snapped him out of his meditative state. He leaned over and looked through the forward windows of the cockpit and saw the gray and green planet of E Chaio filling

it. “We’re about to execute a controlled descent into the atmosphere, your Excellency, please remain seated and with your lap restraint buckled,” the Benga woman called loudly. “We should land at the Executive building in about thirty measures.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Jason answered in a strong, clear voice.

The pilot was good. The ship only shuddered a little as it eased down into the atmosphere, and that ended when the ship descended into thicker air and established a shallow descent vector down towards the megacity below, a city that spanned an entire continent. Jason prepared himself mentally for what was to come as the ship came in, slowed more and more, and then he felt the ship’s landing skids extend. Moments later, he felt it land.

He unbuckled and stood up as the Benga pilot, three times taller than him, stepped past him and opened the hatch. He stepped in front of it as it opened, and he saw a contingent of about thirty Benga, some in civilian garb and some in uniforms, standing on the edge of the platform waiting. The stairs were Benga sized, so he had to carefully navigate them while wearing his robes, which made him look a tiny bit undignified as the procession approached him. When he reached the bottom, he smoothed out his robes and tucked his hands back into his sleeves, returning to a dignified posture, as the Benga procession reached him. “Your Grace, I am Bol Ven Ar Mek, main executive in charge of appointments and scheduling for the Board,” he said, almost smugly, and it surprised Jason a bit he knew the proper way to address him, given there was no such thing as a Duke in the Syndicate. Sha Ra must have included that blurb in her reports when she negotiated with the Confederation. He was certainly proud of his position. “It is my honor to escort you to the Board Room, where they are awaiting you.”

“Thank you, your Excellency,” Jason returned in a calm voice. “Please lead the way.”

The uniformed guards formed up around Jason and the five government officials, and they started towards the large doors at the far side of the landing pad. The Benga had to walk very slowly because of Jason’s short legs, almost looking like they were shuffling along, and he felt several feathery brushes against his mind as the telepaths among them carefully

reached out towards him, trying to test his defenses without giving themselves away. He didn't react to it; he simply maintained his towering mental defenses that would give them no way in and continued to walk. The doors at the end of the pad opened to a long passage, with guards standing at stations about every two hundred shakra or so. He was led into the building and quite a ways in, passing through four different ionic field arches. He didn't hesitate walking through the first of them, and he made no indication of his relief when the tactical gestalt did not go offline. The shielding had worked! He had to walk through three more of them on the way to the end of the hallway, where the doors of another elevator were set into a wall. They encountered no other Benga, which told him that they hallways had been cleared for his arrival.

"Was your journey here acceptable, your Grace?" the executive asked as they stood before the elevator doors, waiting for them to open.

"It was actually quite pleasant. My compliments to the pilot of the transport, your Excellency. She was quite skilled and provided me a relaxing and comfortable trip."

"I'll be sure to mention that to the Board, your Grace," he replied smoothly as they boarded the elevator. Jason turned to face the doors, more than keenly aware of the Benga surrounding him as the elevator started to ascend, going up about twenty floors or so before it slowed to a stop.

He'd seen the building plans. He knew where he was. He closed his eyes and focused himself, and then opened them when the elevator doors slid open. They stepped into an antechamber, and he knew that the doors on the far side opened into the Board Room. He knew that this room was filled with sensors and detection systems, and this was the moment of truth. He walked at the same pace as before as he knew he was being intensely scanned, but he was confident. The Kimdori had this scanner tech, they'd tested their SCM extensively against it, and they knew it worked. So he walked sedately, at a stately pace behind the chamberlain—that was more or less what he was—until they were at the doors leading inside the heart of Syndicate government. And since there were no alarms going off or no guards trying to grab him, that told him that their sensors had picked up neither his tactical nor the spiders.

He was in. Now he just had to execute the next phase, as Kraal did as well. If Kraal held to the plan, he would increase the broadcast node to full power five minutes after Jason entered the room, so he had to stall the Board for fifteen minutes minimum. It would take the spiders ten minutes to get out of his robes and disperse into the room, mainly into the air.

But he didn't think about that. He didn't think about the plan, he only thought of trying to get a peace treaty out of the Board. That was why he was here. It was the reason he was here. And he had to keep that firmly in mind.

The doors opened, and the chamberlain led him into the Board Room, the one place in the Syndicate where every Benga wanted to be. There were 153 chairs arranged at semicircular long tables in three tiers, with the crest of the Syndicate on the floor in the center, a mosaic of gemstones. The Chairman sat at the center of the top tier, and the others were arrayed around him and down the two tiers by the value of the megacorp they controlled. There were 24 guards in the room, standing around the base of the lower tier with four at the doors leading in. The current Chairman was Bal Kib Vai Hu, CEO of the Vilsarti Corporation, the largest and most valuable megacorp in the Syndicate. It was by virtue of that net worth that Bal Kib was Chairman; so long as his company was the largest and richest, he would be in control of the Board. Jason stopped when the chamberlain did, and he clapped his hands three times at a slow, deliberate pace.

"Masters and Mistresses of the Board, the Grand Duke Jason Karinne of the Confederation," he called in a powerful, clear voice. The Benga motioned him forward with a sweeping motion of his arm, and Jason started forward, keeping a tight grip on his emotions. These were the men that had done so much harm to Aria and the Dreamers, but he had to keep that out of his thoughts. To think about it would make him angry, and this was not the time or the place to be angry. He walked out onto the gemstone mosaic and stopped, then he bowed to the Chairman fluidly.

"Master Chairman, exalted members of the Board of CEOs of the Syndicate," he began in a clear, measured voice, "I am Jason Karinne, Grand Duke of the House of Karinne and member of the Confederation of Allied Empires. I stand before you as the chosen agent of the Confederation to negotiate a permanent treaty of peace between the Syndicate and the Confederation. As a show of good faith and hope that we can come to an

amicable agreement, I have come alone and unarmed. It is my hope that when I leave here, a reasonable and lucrative agreement will have been reached between our governments.”

“You are quite fluent in our language, Grand Duke,” a woman on the lowest tier to his right declared. That was Mem Zee Shi Ba, CEO of Hastra Dynamics. “You choose your words with the care of a Benga.”

“It is only proper to use the host’s chosen language, Mistress,” he answered calmly.

“It makes me wonder where you learned it.”

“Part of our initial negotiations with your Third Expeditionary Fleet was the exchange of languages so we could communicate with one another,” he answered. “So I learned your language from one of you. It is no stretch that I would have the skill of a native speaker.”

“That’s an amusing anecdote, but has no bearing on why you are here,” the Chairman called strongly. “And I find the audacity of your Confederation almost admirable, Grand Duke. You stand before us now seeking peace after attacking us barely one rotation ago.”

He tucked his hands into his sleeves and looked up at the aged Benga with a calm, stony expression. “If brevity is what you require, Master Chairman, then by all means let us get to the heart of the matter. Yes, the Confederation attacked your shipyard facility just one rotation ago. Our intent wasn’t to destroy your shipyard. The attack was purely a diversion to conceal our true objective, the removal of the Dreamers on the planet’s surface from your custody,” he said, which caused all of them to stare at him hawkishly. “That is what our entire offensive in this galaxy has been about, Masters and Mistresses. The Dreamers, and the Oracles. We have taken Atroviet and have removed the Dreamers there from the moon. We have taken every Oracle that you didn’t kill yourself, from both your ships and from your planetside facilities. We have completely removed the Dreamers and the Oracles from your custody, and now we shall withdraw from this galaxy and return to our own. We have no more reason to be here,” he declared in a strong voice.

“That’s it? This was about the brownskins?” the Chairman asked.

“That is all,” he answered. “The Confederation has no desire to conquer this galaxy, and we have done what we have done to ensure that the peace treaty that I am here to negotiate will be honored by both sides. We have only one driving goal in this, Masters and Mistresses. We want you to *leave us alone*,” he said intensely. “So long as you do not send your fleets to our galaxy to make war on us, we will be peaceful neighbors. We do not wish to expand. We do not wish to take what is yours. We have no interest in this galaxy. We only want you to respect our borders.”

“Which you do by invading us,” the man to the Chairman’s immediate right declared. That was Mor Do Gri Nak, CEO of Emelar Industries, the second largest megacorp in the Syndicate.

“It was our belief that so long as you had control of the Oracles, any peace treaty made between us would be violated the measure they predicted that a future war with us would end with your victory,” he answered simply. “Without your guarantee of victory and knowing the full extent of the damage we caused with our small fleet in the short amount of time we have been here, we feel that you will honor a treaty. After all, there is no profit in losing, and you have already tasted the might of the Confederation Combined Military.”

They were quiet a long moment. He could sense they were sending among themselves, betraying the fact that *all* of them were telepathic. “No treaty can be made unless the return of all Syndicate citizens is agreed upon, and the Dreamers are Syndicate citizens.”

“No. They are not,” Jason answered calmly. “They are *my* people, Master Chairman. You captured them from the Consortium, and the Consortium abducted them from a Karinne territory approximately twelve hundred orbits ago. We didn’t know they were here until the Third Expeditionary Fleet entered our galaxy, bringing an Oracle with it.

“The Dreamers are of a race called the *Faey* in my language, and there are Faey in the House of Karinne. The entire Faey race is telepathic, and so when your fleet brought the Oracle to our galaxy, the Faey on the ships that brought our negotiators to parlay with your Fleet commander sensed her presence. That warned us that the Consortium invaders from a thousand orbits ago captured Faey and took them back to this galaxy, and over the course of those thousand orbits, you captured their descendants from the

Consortium. That must have been very soon after the Consortium brought them back to this galaxy, given how many there were on Atrovot when we captured the moon,” he mused. “So, exalted Masters and Mistresses, I have done nothing more than fulfilled my duty to the Dreamers as their rightful ruler and returned them back to their original home.”

He gave them a calm look. “So, Master Chairman, exalted Masters and Mistresses, that is where it stands. The approximately fifty million Syndicate Navy crewmen we have captured after defeating the expeditionary fleet and capturing Atrovot will indeed be returned home to you as quickly as can be arranged, but the Dreamers will not be any part of this negotiation. They are *my* people, they are the descendants of members of the House of Karinne who were taken from their homes by the Consortium, and I will not return them to you. The Consortium kidnapped them from their homes, and I will return their descendants to their rightful place.”

“Easily claimed, but unproven,” the Chairman said flippantly.

“Oh, I am quite certain you already know that truth, Master Chairman,” he replied. “The Empress Dahnai Merrane of the Faey Imperium was present at the initial negotiations with Fleet Commander Au Mai Sha Ra, and I absolutely guarantee you that she informed you that there were blue-skinned Dreamers in Galaxy B,” he replied smoothly. “The Faey are a very visually distinctive race. There would be no doubt that the Fleet Commander would recognize her as a Dreamer instantly.”

They were quiet for a long moment, sending among themselves privately. He stood there with a calm, almost serene expression, hands tucked in his sleeves, hoping that he looked eminently confident and unruffled, which they would construe as believing what he said. And they were quiet long enough for the spiders to activate. He stood there as they began to leave his robe, did nothing that might draw attention as the microscopic machines drifted away from him in the air and skittered away from him on the ground, beginning to spread through the room. They didn’t leave in such dense numbers that they became visible, so he knew it was going to take a good fifteen minutes or so for them to leave his robe and spread into the room.

“While the matter of the Dreamers is not up for negotiation, the matter of your Naval crewmen most definitely is. We would wish to return them to their homes as soon as is able, for feeding fifty million mouths that produce nothing in return is an expensive undertaking. We only need arrange a place for our transports to bring them—”

“We are not done with the matter of the Dreamers, Grand Duke,” the Chairman said strongly. “There can be no peace so long as you hold our people.”

“Then I humbly submit a simple solution, Master Chairman. We shall all of us go to where the Dreamers are and ask *them* where they wish to dwell,” he said in a calm voice. “They are sentient beings capable of making their own decision. I will guarantee you here and now that any Dreamer that wishes to return to Atrovet shall be allowed to do so, under the supervision of any agent you so authorize to oversee the process. I will not hold any Dreamer against their will,” he said in a clear voice. “And I offer to do it *right now*. Call one of your ships to carry us back to my home galaxy, and we will ask the Dreamers where they wish to live. Every single one of them.”

“Your galaxy? How are they in *your* galaxy?” the Chairman asked.

“We have the technology to travel between our galaxies in a matter of divisions. How do you think we got over here so quickly after defeating your expeditionary fleet, Chairman?” Jason asked simply. “How am I standing before you now? You say the word, and we will be in my galaxy three divisions after we board a ship to take us there. Then you may talk to the Dreamers yourself and ask them where they want to live.”

He let them chew over that and did they ever. He stood there with his hands tucked in his sleeves for a long time as they were silent, sensing a large uptake in their sending, and the emotions rippling through it. He practiced one of the tricks that the *shaman* taught him to keep control of his emotions without having to resort to meditation, which kept him calm and alert, observant and relaxed. He had just reminded them of what Miaari felt was the one thing that their military advisors had been screaming in their ears over their plan to invade the Milky Way with their entire fleet, the Confederation’s intergalactic capability. The admirals and generals understood that it would put all of Andromeda at great risk if they sent their

entire fleet, for it would give the CCM free rein to run wild all over Syndicate territory, and do it for *years*, then get the fleet back to the Milky Way in plenty of time to meet the Syndicate's invasion fleet. Kraal had quite a few amusing recordings of military officers warning, pleading, yelling, screaming, even begging the Board not to send the entire fleet, and Jason's remark had just reminded them of those warnings.

He was quite content to let them debate. Every minute they spent debating was another minute the spiders had to spread through the room.

"Your proposal is ludicrous, Grand Duke," the Chairman declared. "The Dreamers are Syndicate citizens, and no peace treaty will be entertained until they are returned home."

He activated the gestalt, giving the amplifiers stacks time to charge, during which he stood silent and impassive. "Then there will be no peace treaty," he said in a calm voice. "Under the traditions of my people, you have thirty rotations to prepare."

"For what?" someone sneered.

"For death," he replied simply. "To put your affairs into order and arrange heirs to your fortunes and your properties. The Confederation will withdraw from your galaxy and will not wage war upon your planets or your people, exalted members of the Board, for our war is not with the Syndicate's people or her military. Our war will be with *you*, the men and woman before me now. And *only* you. Our attacks and operations will be targeted at you and you only, and they will begin in thirty rotations. The attacks will continue until all of you are dead, and then we will offer your successors the same chance given to you, to sign a peace treaty. And if they decline, then we will give *them* thirty rotations to prepare. And so on, and so on, until men and women sit in those chairs who are willing to listen to reason.

"Because we believe that you have the right to understand what is coming, understand this. Everything that is yours is considered a legal and viable target by the forms of war my people practice. Your lives, your properties, the institutions holding your money, anything that is yours is considered a target of war. What is left after you die will be left alone, for it will no longer belong to you, it will belong to your named heir. We do not

visit the sins of the parent upon the child. As is tradition among my people, we sent you a warning by destroying only one of your holdings, and you did not heed it.

“So it comes to this. Thirty rotations, Masters and Mistresses. You have thirty rotations of peace to make the necessary preparations to pass your estates on to your heirs. And then we will come for you.” He gave a slow, fluid bow. “These negotiations are ended. I bid you farewell, exalted members of the Board, and good luck.”

He turned around slowly to face the doors to the elevator, and he brought his talent to bear, sensing every mind within five floors above and below. He also began to actively warp space around himself, which would turn away any surprise weapon they fired at him. He then began to slowly walk towards the doors, seemingly completely ignoring the 153 Benga executives and the guards behind him...who began to *laugh*.

“Do you really think we are going to just let you leave here, Grand Duke?” the Chairman scoffed.

“Yes. You will,” Jason answered without turning his head in a serene, focused voice.

“Take this dog into custody,” the Chairman ordered. Two of the four guards standing at the elevator started forward with nasty smiles, not bothering to draw any weapons. After all, they were three times his size, they saw him as no threat. He just walked towards them as they quickly covered the distance, reaching out with his talent, reaching within them, and finding his target...which he could only do because he knew exactly where it was. The two men staggered to a stop and gasped, clutching at their chests through their uniforms, and then absolute fountains of dark green blood erupted from their mouths as Jason crushed their hearts, which caused instant hemorrhaging in their chest cavities and made the blood flood their lungs. The two men collapsed to the floor, unmoving, as copious amounts of blood spread out in a pool around their heads.

It was the first time he had ever had to use his power like that. And it did not please him in any way that he was forced to do it.

He daintily took hold of his robes and lifted them off the floor before walking between the two pools, not even looking at the two corpses. The

other two men did draw their weapons, and one of them fired at him. The blast of energy bent away from him and hit the floor, gouging a black smoking hole in the polished metal. He fired again, and again, and yet again, each shot bending into the floor, and Jason reached out an open hand, and then made a bit of a show out of clenching his fist. The man's eyes rolled back into his head as he went up onto his tiptoes, he convulsed violently, then he collapsed to the floor. The other guard at the elevator doors was sent flying across the room with a casual wave of Jason's hand, crashing into the wall and falling to the floor, where he groaned and feebly tried to roll onto his back. There was a smear of green blood on the wall where he struck it.

That was only what could be seen. In the invisible spectrum of the mindscape, Jason was assaulted by multiple Benga telepaths, working in concert to try to break his defenses. He allowed them to hammer on his psychic walls for a long time—at least within the mindscape—then he countered by tracking each one back to its originating mind and dominating that mind with swift and skilled strikes, surgical in their precision and overwhelming in their power. Once those telepaths belonged to him, he set them against their brethren, giving the remaining telepathic attackers something much more immediate to worry about.

When he reached the doors, he tucked his hands into his sleeves again and stood motionless as he split his attention into two major splits and maintained his spatial warp as he began to focus his power on the door, focusing it into the molecular structure of the metal, which began to heat it up. A hard shield shimmered into view in front of the tiers, protecting the Board from anyone not on the tiers, as all the remaining guards and several hidden weapon batteries opened up on him. All the energy streams bent away from his body and struck the walls and floor around him, filling the air with acrid smoke. He simply stood there, unmoving, unflinching, his expression stoic and calm, then took two steps back as the metal of the door began to glow red hot. And then it began to melt.

“Stop him!” the Chairman screamed. “Stop him now!”

Your men can't stop me, Chairman, Jason sent calmly, sending openly and so non-telepaths could hear with all the power his gestalt could give him, to impress upon him just how much stronger he was than them, and so

everyone in the city around them heard what was coming. Benga over a hundred kathra away heard him. *As I think you may have deduced, my telepathy and my telekinesis are far beyond even your most powerful talents. Your people have barely scratched what talent can do, and you are no match for me. I could kill everyone in this room with a thought, but I will not, because the traditions of my people grant you thirty rotations of protection,* he told them with enough power to make a few of their noses begin to bleed. *But understand this. In thirty rotations, we will come. Men and women even stronger than I am, with psionic powers you cannot even imagine, powers you cannot counter. And since we have our own Dreamers, that means we have our own Oracles, so we will find you no matter where you hide. And when we find you, we will kill you. One. By. One. Until you are no more.* The molten metal sagged towards the floor, exposing the elevator shaft beyond. The elevator platform wasn't there, but he wasn't expecting it to be. He turned to face the Board, regarding them through the hail of weapons fire and through the hard shield as a glob of the metal door was pulled up off the floor by his power and was quickly pulled like taffy to form a small disc, and then the glow bled out of it as he drained it of its heat using his power. He lifted his robe and put his foot on the dull gray metal and stepped up onto it, then let his robes fall back around it, almost making it look like he was levitating. He tucked his hands back into his sleeves and let them just continue to flail at him, bending all their shots Jedi-style back at the automated weapons, destroying them one by one, until the firing slowly petered out. The guards looked at him with stunned expressions, but he was looking up at the Chairman. *If you would prefer to live, then all you have to do is sign the peace treaty. But understand this, all of you. Once the thirty rotations are up, there will be no pardons. There will be no reprieve. There will be no mercy. Even if you sign a peace treaty after your time is up, you will still die. And after all of you are dead, the life expectancy of your replacements on the Board of the Syndicate will be measured thirty rotations at a time. Those are the terms. They are not negotiable. They cannot be altered. You will accept them, or you will die.* The disc floated backwards into the hole he melted into the door, the air around it wavering from the heat. *That choice is yours.*

He couldn't resist one final, parting shot, one of his final gambits. *Right before I put Fleet Commander Au Mai Sha Ra face down in the sand, I told her she had no idea of the dreadful mistake that your people had made by*

spreading your aggression beyond the boundaries of your own galaxy, he sent, his thought adamant, rippling with overwhelming authority. You are not the gods of this universe. You are a big fish in a small pond, and you have lifted your head out of the water to discover a world of landwalking giants you never knew was there. The Confederation is just one of the giants walking beyond your pond, Chairman, exalted members of the Board, and we are nowhere near the most powerful, by a measure that I don't think you can imagine. There are empires out beyond this galaxy of such unfathomable power that they can fall upon your galaxy like rampaging beasts and eradicate all life in it, down to the last microbe. And it is my hope that this lesson in humility makes you much more careful should you venture beyond the borders of your galaxy again. As big a fish you may be in this small pond you call your home galaxy, you are nothing compared to the monsters that lurk beyond your shores, monsters so fearsome that even we who can smite you with impunity flee in terror when they appear. Anger them at your peril.

You. Have. Been. Warned.

And with that, he descended out of their view.

He went down far enough to ensure he was out of sight, and *then* he wilted on the little platform he made, holding his arms down at his sides as he gave a savage grimace. The gestalt was running at maximum power for minutes, and it was getting so hot that it was threatening to cook the flesh of his arms. He'd stood there impassively for minutes while his arms burned from the inside, but he never let them see it, never let them see how much pain he was in. He could barely move his hands, and he had little control over those movements.

It seemed that all of them, even Cybi, overlooked a critical design flaw in the internal gestalt, insufficient heat dissipation during extended use. There were heat sinks inserted in the amplifier stacks, but they weren't enough to counter the heat the stacks were putting out with extended use at full power. He had to resort to his power to cool them down, prevent his blood from overheating and raising his core body temperature beyond deadly levels, quelling the motion of the molecules of the metal surrounding the gestalt, which effectively cooled them off; heat was nothing more than the vibration and motion of atoms and molecules within their

molecular bonds, after all. But the damage had been done, he realized as he stood back up. He could barely move his hands, the muscles and nerves had been damaged by the heat, and the insides of his arms were throbbing with considerable pain. Both of his hands were more or less frozen half-closed, his fingers bent inward from where he was gripping the straps on the insides of his sleeves, and he could barely move his wrist. But he could still move his elbows, mainly since the heat hadn't cooked the flesh around the joint. His fingers were discolored, almost blackened as if he had severe frostbite, and blisters were forming anywhere his skin was close to the metal endolimb, on his fingers, the palms and backs of his hands, and around his wrists.

[Activate the plan!] he communed to Kraal through his memory band.
[I'm out of the audience chamber and on the move!]

[Understood, cousin. Destination, Objective A. Objective B and Objective C on standby.]

[Objective A, understood. I'm on my way as soon as I get out of the building.]

[Mission status?] Kraal asked.

[Mission accomplished!]

[Well done, cousin. Personal status?]

[My hands and forearms are injured. I'll be unable to grab or grasp anything, warn anyone that may try to reach out to me. Outside of that, I'm alright.]

[Understood. The gestalt?]

[Operational.]

[Understood.]

He was in the elevator shaft, and thanks to Kraal getting his hands on the building's plans, he knew what was within it. He descended only four floors, then stopped the disc at a grate covering a large air shaft. He defeated the alarm sensor on the grate and then pulled it out with his power, moved the disc inside, then replaced it, managing to do it without setting off the alarm. It was more than large enough for him to stand inside of it. He

knew from the plans that the duct extended all the way to a room at the edge of the building, an office with large windows to provide the executive that occupied it with a view, and he could get out through that window. They would be expecting him at every door. The duct had security in it, part of the paranoia of the Board, so he had to be very careful or he'd set off a sensor that would reveal his location. But regardless of that, the building's alarm was sounding, and that meant that the halls were going to flood with security officers, on top of soldiers mobilizing from the garrison attached to the building.

That was why he was in the air duct.

According to Kraal's information, the air duct had weight sensors in the metal, and both cameras and motion detection sensors mounted into the ductwork, and he could defeat all of them with his power. The disc would keep him off the duct, thus bypassing the weight sensor, and he could blind the cameras and the motion sensors with light manipulation. The tricky part was going to be the motion sensors, due to their sensitivity, which according to Kraal's data detected changes in the reflection of infrared light back to a sensor. He'd have to do it just right, or the change in the infrared light would trip the sensor.

Because he had to move slowly and carefully, he was only about two thirds of the way through the duct when lights appeared at the grate behind him. He turned to see two armored Benga hovering outside the grate, too small for them to easily fit in it, and their spotlights were right on him. He reacted before they did, reaching out and swiftly dominating them, and then he had one of them call out over their comm. "He's in the air duct on floor 168!" the guard boomed, and the two of them descended quickly out of sight. They truly believed he was there, when he was on floor 173. That would decoy off any security in the office he planned to enter. He made his way to the end of the duct and dropped down into a large, empty office, then moved immediately to the window. He pushed towards it with the stiffened claw that was his right hand, and the window shattered, causing a rush of air out into the void. He carried himself out into the polluted air and looked at his destination, which was a plaza about a kathra away, easily visible from nearly 3,000 shakra in the air. He saw their civilian traffic crawling all over, but he also saw warnechs arriving on the scene.

Faster than Kraal anticipated.

Oh well. Dealing with warmechs was part of the plan, which was why Jason had extensively studied the ones they'd captured to learn how they work. That would allow him to disable a warmech with his telekinesis and do it without harming the pilot. But the *pilot* was the weakest link within a warmech, at least to Jason. He started angling down so he'd reach the ground well off the campus of the capitol complex, and he had to bend away dozens of shots at him from the building, fired from automated weapon platforms mounted on the sides and from security forces, then he dominated the pilot of the warmech that was rapidly approaching him. He didn't have the pilot give any indication he'd been dominated, not until Jason reached the ground, civilians who had scrambled for shelter when the shots from above started peppering the ground, watching him with slow realization that he was the telepathic voice they heard when the warmech landed right behind him, without him even glancing over his shoulder, then stood in obedient defense of him as he stepped off the metal disc and began to walk towards the beacon.

Slowly.

This was about optics. Just as he'd slowly strode from the audience chamber, he wanted the Board to see how utterly unconcerned he was at their amusing attempts to stop him. He wanted to scare the hell out of them, so their successors would be more willing to sign a peace treaty. And while his telekinesis may be fearsome thanks to Mrar, it was his *telepathy* that made him far more dangerous, especially in a city where he was surrounded by minds to dominate. The Syndicate understood the power of telepathy, but they had never encountered a telepath like a gestalt-boosted Generation, who had been trained by one of the most skilled telepaths alive and backed that up with the kind of power that only a gestalt could provide. And besides, it wasn't spiking his gestalt as much to use telepathy as it did telekinesis.

The dominated warmech was joined by others in short succession, then by several armored infantry, until it looked like he was being escorted down the avenue by an honor guard of Syndicate military. They surrounded him, more or less shielding him from distant snipers with their great size, with the warmechs surrounding them to provide more protection, and all of them

were firing on soldiers and warmechs that weren't dominated, actively protecting him from them. Jason had to fend off several Benga telepaths in their attempts to break his domination; they'd learned not to try to attack *him*, so they were going after those he had dominated. So while he was walking sedately, with a serene expression, under that he was a blitz of activity as he protected his little parade from Benga telepaths while they protected him physically.

He did Ryn proud.

The procession walked nearly half a kathra before the Syndicate revealed its counter, in the form of a Naval destroyer slowly descending over the city. That, Kraal had predicted would happen, and that finally spurred him to move with much more swiftness. He could turn a shot from a line vessel away, but the damage it would do when it hit something put him at risk, despite being able to warp space. The heat of the blast would bleed through the warped space, and it would cook him alive. He only had to go about another kathra, so he had one of his war mech pilot puppets pick him up and engage his glide drives. His pet warmechs left the infantry behind, whom he simply knocked out.

And then he hit his first snag in the plan. [*Objective A impossible, switch to Objective M,*] Kraal instructed.

[*What's going on, cousin?*]

[*Diffusion field is up over A's location,*] he answered. A bridge couldn't form a nexus in a diffusion field. [*Field does not cover Objective M.*]

[*Switching to Objective M, roger,*] he informed, then had the war mech pilot carrying him turn down another avenue and sent the remaining war mech pilots to attack the destroyer. But more destroyers were starting to descend, he saw, and that caused him to consider not being such an easy target. Objective M was a beacon set inside one of the old abandoned mass transit systems, which put it underground and accessible by three different routes through the warren of underground tunnels under the surface of the city.

Going under the surface had benefits and risks. The benefits were that he was out of the line of fire by the line vessels and it was easier for him to hide, given that their sensor network had issues penetrating the ground, but

the drawback was that down in the tunnels, he had much more limited movement. That confined him to pre-built and pre-determined routes, and if they got scanners down there and managed to catch him in a long tunnel with no side passages, they could just stack the entrances and trap him inside. There were three ways to reach Objective M underground, but one of those paths offered him a bit of flexibility, since it passed through one of the abandoned residential areas for workers, and so it went through a large gallery with streets and alleys, giving him room to maneuver.

That was his best option. Staying topside was going to be suicide once those line vessels got into a firing position. The Benga wouldn't care about killing a few thousand civilians, so they would most definitely fire on him.

The warmech pilot carried him past three more megabuildings, then slowed to a stop at an unassuming grate by a sidewalk and set him down gently. He then sent it off to attack the destroyer with the others, lifted the grate with his power, and then showed off a bit by picking up his own weight with his telekinesis and lowering himself down into the shaft. He replaced the grate over him and descended down into the darkness. The grate was a utility line access point, so the tunnel running down at the bottom carried power conduit and pipes, probably for water. He knew that the tunnel would intersect with another tunnel that would lead to an old unused serviceway that would get into that residential gallery. On the far end of the gallery was the subway tunnel the old mass transit system used for its trains, and that would take him to Objective M.

[I'm going to need night vision gear,] he told Kraal. [Are any agents close enough to access an equipment cache?]

[Get to the first intersection. A night vision mini-cam will be waiting for you that you can merge with,] Kraal answered.

[Understood. Keep them away from me, Kraal. I don't want them to find out we have agents on E Chaio.]

[The drop will be made before you arrive.]

[Understood. En route.]

He knew they knew he was in the tunnels, but they'd yet to respond. He was forced to move along the tunnel without his eyes, using a hand on the wall and counting his steps to know when he was getting close to the

intersection, which took several long moments. He approached the intersection and got close enough to sense the biogenic chip in a camera only about a tikra across. He fetched it with his power and affixed it to his forehead, just over his right eye using the skin bonder, and then he merged to it. The tunnel became visible when he accessed the camera's feed, splitting his attention so it overlaid his normal vision and syncing the camera to his eyes so the camera always tracked with the movement of his eyes so the two different visual feeds aligned. Being able to see made him move much faster, turning right at the intersection and hurrying along, passing several large rodent animals that looked up at him in open curiosity as he rushed past them. He had his mind open for other minds, hunting for any that descended to his level, and that was exactly what he detected in front of him.

They knew where he was. Their sensor net could penetrate this deeply into the subsurface.

But it also exposed their main weakness, and that was the fact that they had to send people down here after him, people with minds he could attack. The Syndicate didn't employ robots or drones the way the Karinnes did, they didn't have any Rockers or Spot drones or anything of the sort. The minds ahead of him were telepaths, which told him they were at least that smart. Sending a non-telepath down here after him would have been the pinnacle of stupidity. He slowed to a stop and reached out, finding their six minds, and he struck with great speed and power. Since they were telepaths, trying to dominate them would be too tricky for him to bother. Dominating a telepath was a delicate operation that took a lot of precision to do without harming the victim, and he didn't have the time for that. Instead of using a scalpel, he instead used a club, overwhelming the six minds with sheer power and sending them into comas. The fact that he struck from so far away, before they could sense him since he was actively hiding his mind, added to the surprise and let him take all six down in a simultaneous attack that barely lasted a second.

It took him nearly ten minutes to reach their inert bodies, stepping through them where they'd been in a small chamber in an intersection waiting for him to arrive. And as luck would have it for him, he only had to go about 400 more shakra to reach the abandoned serviceway. It had been covered over, so there was no grate or door, and that required him to again

resort to his power. He melted through the tunnel wall the same way he'd melted through the elevator door, and again, he saved a piece of the metal and formed a disc out of it for him to use as a levitation aid—it was easier to levitate the disc and stand on it than it was for him to levitate himself. And he needed to do it this time, since the abandoned tunnel beyond the melted wall was partially flooded, with a good two shakra of stagnant, foul-smelling water on the floor. He endured the awful smell as he moved down the passageway on his disc, keeping track of the minds down in the tunnels. There were none in the residential gallery ahead of him, mainly because it was so old that it probably didn't appear on some of their maps. But there were dozens of minds in the tunnels around him, who were now milling around, some reversing direction. Their sensors told them which direction he was in, but their maps didn't show them how to reach him. He figured he had about ten minutes before someone in the city's planning department sent them updated maps showing the tunnels that were sealed over and abandoned, so he had to get ahead of them as much as he could. The residential gallery was going to be dangerous because it was so open—

The entire tunnel shook violently, and he heard a muted explosion overhead. Dust and some stone fragments rained down from the roof and plunked into the water below. There was another one, then another, and it was then that he realized that the ships over the city were firing their weapons at his current location, trying to collapse the tunnel he was in.

He knew they would fire on him and kill civilians, but they were willing to fire on him and deal damage to the city as well?

That spurred him on. He knelt down on his disc, gripping the edge as best he could with his injured hand, and went as fast as he could without overheating the gestalt, managing to hit about 50 kathra an hour down the relatively straight tunnel. The ships above were adjusting their aim, so there was a constant rain of dust and small stones from the roof along his path, the dust adding to the stench to make it hard to breathe. He winced when he got hit in the shoulder by a large stone, nearly making his arm go numb, then felt another one hit him in the face, cutting into his cheek. He put his other arm up to protect his face as he saw the end of the passage, then slowed to a stop in a bit of dismay when he got there.

They were stairs going down. The passage was *underwater*.

He had little choice. He formed a solid telekinetic shield around himself, then descended down into the foul water. That limited him to the air inside the shield, so he moved as quickly as he could, going down the stairs and down the passage, until he reached a large hatch. That was the opening into the residential gallery, and he could only hope and pray that it wasn't flooded as well. It spiked his gestalt to hold him up on the disc and maintain the shield *and* open the hatch, pulling the locking bar and then having to exert force to pull it open, given that the door opened inward and that put the weight of the water against it. But to his relief, the chamber beyond was not flooded, so the water started to gush out of the door. He got out and ascended up over the door and then relaxed his power, which made the rushing water pull the door closed. He was at the south end of the residential gallery, which was a huge cavern with a ceiling a good fifty shakra overhead and the floor littered with small home units, placed almost randomly, which turned the streets around them into narrow, crooked thoroughfares that would quickly confuse and disorient anyone not familiar with their patterns. Because the Benga could break into the gallery at any time, he stayed down on those streets so he couldn't be seen, moving through them atop his disc with confidence. He had reason to be confident, he had a map of the place. The shelling from above continued, and the roof above shuddered and conducted large *BOOMS* down into the gallery. The minds down in the tunnels were getting much closer, which told him that they now had updated maps and knew how to get into the gallery.

[Objective M no longer viable,] Kraal warned.

[What happened?]

[The gallery collapsed,] he answered. *[New destination, Objective Alpha. Once Alpha achieved, Objective Q.]*

[Alpha, understood,] he replied, changing direction now heading for the east side of the gallery. Objective Alpha was an equipment cache, a special suit of Crusader armor rigged with Kindori SCM for stealth, which he would need to get to Objective Q. That was very deep down into the subsurface, down so deep that the air was toxic. He couldn't reach it without armor or some kind of breathing system. The armor, however, changed his tactics. No one could see him and live now, because if they saw he had armor, then they'd know that he'd somehow smuggled the armor

onto the planet, and that would alert them that the Kimdori had penetration into E Chaio.

Objective Q was actually the smart choice, because it was so deep under the subsurface that they wouldn't be able to track him with their sensor system.

Objective Alpha was in one of the abandoned service tunnels even deeper down than the gallery, part of a much older tunnel network that had been abandoned centuries ago. He could reach it from an old utility tunnel that went out from the east side of the gallery he was in, one that would have a major advantage for him.

It was an old sewer tunnel, and it wasn't sized for a Benga.

The much older tunnels were built back when E Chaio had many more non-Benga on it, who were used as slave labor to build the planet-spanning city, so many of their service and utility tunnels were sized for a person more Jason's size, not a Benga. The armor stashed down there was in a tunnel a Benga couldn't enter, which was why it was selected to be a weapon cache location. That armor was built for him, so it had a tactical gestalt in it. And that would also be a major boon, since it meant he no longer had to use the ones built into his arms, that had all but destroyed his hands.

He reached the tunnel quickly, which was under a grate in the floor of the gallery. It dropped down about thirty shakra and went north and south, and south would lead him down into the deeper sewer networks, which would then connect with the old tunnel network holding his armor. He'd have to double back almost halfway back to the capitol to get to it, and from there, he'd have to travel about 26 kathra to reach Objective Q. That was a beacon in one of the oldest intact residential galleries about 50 kathra from the capitol, and since it was specifically built for the "little races," the tunnels leading into it weren't big enough for Benga to enter. And that deep under the surface, nearly 300 shakra deep and just above the actual surface of the planet, their sensors wouldn't be able to find him.

He *barely* made it into the tunnel. The destroyers above managed to blow a hole into the gallery just as he was lifting the grate out of the way, and he had to dive into the tunnel to escape getting crushed by falling

debris. The landing was bone-jarring, and he nearly broke his ankle on impact, but he managed to hobble out of the shaft and get into the dry sewer tunnel before the rubble above landed on him. It sealed him into the tunnel, but luckily for him, he was in the right one. It also meant that they had to dig out the tunnel to reach him. He paused to check his ankle, which was severely sprained but not broken, and that incited him to find a relatively flat piece of rubble from the pile, sit down on it, and have it carry him down the sewer tunnel.

For them not coming anywhere near him, they were certainly wearing him down. He had a laceration on his face and shoulder from falling debris, so he had blood on his face and inside his robes going down his arm, and now he had a nearly broken ankle that would make walking very painful. But luckily he hadn't tired yet, so he was able to carry himself with his telekinetic power, sitting on the roughly elliptical piece of stone from the ceiling that had a flat top and having it float down the tunnel at a jogging pace. The tunnel around him continued to shudder from time to time as the sound of muted explosions reached his ears, as they continued to shell the surface to try to collapse the tunnel he was in. But he was much deeper now, deep enough that no dust was filtering down from the ceiling, and that provided him considerable protection. They had no minds this deep, but there were more and more flooding the tunnels above him.

They were looking for a way down.

It took him nearly half an hour, but he made it. He entered the small utility passage holding his armor, forcing him to abandon his disc and hobble nearly a kathra down the narrow tunnel, but he reached his armor. He quickly got his formal robes off, to where he stood naked, and then got his armor on, having to use telekinesis to do it since his fingers were all but immovable. But once he got his armor on, sealed, and activated, he merged up into it and moved his body using the armor, going limp inside and just letting the armor move for him. He wadded up his robes and stuffed them into a carry case and attached it to his back, then brought up the tactical gestalt. *[Objective Alpha achieved,]* he told Kraal. *[All systems fully operational. Is Objective Q still a go?]*

[Objective Q is go,] he answered.

With the armor, the entire game changed. The armor was equipped with SCM, hiding itself and him from sensors, which meant that they couldn't trap him. He had glide drives now, and he used them, skimming back up the tunnel the way he came, coming back out into the tunnel, and continuing down towards his destination. There was a large chamber ahead that once held a power switching station, and the entrance into the next level of tunnels below this one was in that room. Again, it was through a sewer pipe, the sewer draining into the unused tunnels below, though most of these old tunnels were fairly dry. He'd been lucky so far in that he'd only encountered one flooded tunnel. But he also knew that the danger of running into flooded tunnels increased the lower he got...which wasn't nearly as much a danger now that he was in armor.

The Benga wouldn't be able to easily follow him as he descended down into the sewer tunnel, followed it, then dropped down into an old mass transit tunnel that had to have been built a thousand years ago, but had not collapsed due to the metal used in the tunnel walls and supports. The tunnel had ankle-deep water in it, and the air at this level was now toxic to most life, with barely any oxygen and filled with toxins and chemicals that emanated from decomposing materials and the toxic soup that drained down here from above. It was also getting hotter and hotter as he descended, which also made him glad he was in armor.

He paused to assess the situation. He was now too deep for their ships to collapse the tunnels, it would cause entire sections of the city above to collapse, and he didn't think they were willing to go *that* far. He was now under the sensor line Kraal drew for him on the maps, now too deep for their sensors to track him if for some reason the SCM in his armor failed. There were still Benga in the tunnels above him, swarming around quickly, steadily descending after him in pursuit. But with him now in armor equipped with Kimdori SCM, that meant that their hand scanners could no longer find him. They had lost him on their sensors, but they were still trying to swarm into the lower levels trying to find him.

The other good news for him was that Objective Q was going to be more or less Benga-free. He had to follow the subway line for about 16 kathra, where it intersected another subway line, then take that line to a dead end. That dead end held an access tunnel to a deeper section, he'd go about 10 kathra through a series of tunnels and reach another access tunnel

to an even deeper section, and that would connect to one of the original subterranean complexes on E Chaio, which was built for people his size, not Benga-sized. Once he was in that section, he had to travel about 30 kathra through a series of ancient mass transit tunnels, which would bring him to the gallery holding the beacon.

The Benga weren't giving up. Unable to find him on sensors, they were now using telepaths to try to find his mind. He felt nearly fifty of them brush over him, unable to penetrate his telepathic stealth, a trick Ryn taught him that hid his mind completely from telepaths.

But, he realized, the major danger of this operation was now passed. He'd gotten out of the building, he was in armor, and he was now too deep for their sensors to find him. He had to remain alert, but his life was no longer in direct danger.

[I think I'm out of the worst of it, Kraal,] he informed his friend as he started out again, skimming at a fast pace down the tunnel. [I'm certainly not going to let down my guard, but I'm under the sensor line.]

[I agree, but remain vigilant, cousin. It's when you think you've won the game that you most often lose.]

[Agreed.]

It took him nearly twenty minutes to get to the access point to get down into the next level, and fifteen more to get to the one that reached the lowest level. And while the Benga weren't threatening him, though they were still swarming through the tunnels above looking for him, he felt more and more of a feeling of *foreboding* as he got deeper and deeper under the surface. As he descended the vertical shaft into the original subterranean network, built just over the surface of the planet, he felt a strange dread roil through him, making him nervous and jumpy. He made his way through tunnels that hadn't known the footstep of a bipedal being in thousands of years, many of them partially collapsed or collapsed, many of them filled with water from just at his ankles to well over his head. The air down here was beyond toxic, with virtually no oxygen and filled with pollutants and contaminants that would kill him in a matter of seconds if he took a single breath of it. He finally managed to reach the mass transit tunnel, which was much larger than the tunnels he'd traveled, flooded about four shakra deep with foul

black water. This was the home stretch, he knew, for the gallery was about ten kathra up the tunnel, and the beacon was set on top of one of the buildings within the gallery. He skimmed over the surface of the water, dodging pieces of debris that had fallen out of the roof over the millennia, feeling that dread rise more and more within him. It increased even more when he entered the gallery, ascending on his engines and flying over the collapsed rubble below where most of the smaller buildings and houses had collapsed over the years. There were only four buildings still standing, and his objective was one shaped more or less like a pyramid, which was probably why it survived this long. The beacon was placed at the top.

He landed there a few moments later, looking at the beacon, which was hovering in midair, and from the looks of it, ready to link to the nexus bridge. *[Objective Q achieved,]* he told Kraal. *[Have them open the nexus.]*

[Linking is taking place right now, cousin. ETA 43 seconds.]

He had trouble focusing on Kraal's words, because the nameless dread had reached a fever pitch. He turned around and looked out over the gallery, unable to figure out what it was, but it was so powerful that his flesh was shivering. He took several deep, cleansing breaths, trying to calm down, but he realized slowly that the feeling wasn't coming from *him*.

It was *E Chaio*. It was *E Chaio* that was filled with dread!

He knelt down, putting his armored hand on the roof of the pyramid, and he started making sense of it. *E Chaio* wasn't dead. It—she—had allowed her children to do unspeakable things to her because they were *her children*, and she loved them. She endured the pain, the torments they placed on her, but now...now she understood her error. Their hearts had closed to her, had closed to all love, and it had turned them into abominations. She wanted her children to change, to be what they once were before they formed the Syndicate, and the nameless dread was that Jason would leave before she could convey her wishes.

She felt that her children could be redeemed, and she begged Jason to try to bring it about.

"I...I don't know if I can," he whispered aloud. "They're so far gone, it would take a miracle to bring them back. The darkness of their hearts has closed around them, made them loveless. I'm not sure what I can do to

reverse that. Besides, the change has to come from *them*. I can't force their hearts to change. They have to change on their own. But...but I promise you this. I can try. I doubt I will succeed, but I can try."

The world soul of E Chaio showed him an image, a memory of emotion, of where he could begin.

Gen Lun Ba Ru.

Jason blinked. She was right. Gen was very different from other Benga, he had honor, and in a way, that honor made his heart less hard and callous than other Benga. And he understood her intimation. If the heart of *one* Benga could change, then that Benga could spread that change to the others. And over time, maybe thousands of years, the culture of the Benga just might change with their hearts.

It wouldn't be overnight. It may take centuries, millennia, but for the soul of a planet, that wasn't much time at all.

"I...I understand. I will do as you ask," he said as the nexus bridge opened behind him. "But I can't make any promises. I can only promise that we will try."

The dread instantly ended, replaced by contented anticipation.

"Good luck, E Chaio," he said as he stood back up. He turned and saw the nexus bridge formed, swirling, waiting for him to step through it. He contemplated giving the Board one final tweak, or sending to the population, but he ruled against it. It would be best if he simply left and let the Board stew of him lurking down here for a while. It would give the soldiers here some exercise, and maybe while they were down here, they might learn something about their past. It would be best if he simply disappeared.

He stepped up to the nexus, put his armor into gate passage mode, and did just that.

He stepped through and into Nexus Three, where Songa and two other doctors, Miaari, Zaa, Jyslin, Dahnai, and Symone were waiting anxiously for him, watching him hobble towards them slowly. His wife and *amu* rushed towards him the instant the all-clear was given, and they put his arms around their shoulders and helped him towards the hovering gurney.

Songa quickly knelt down and started removing the sollaret of his armor. *I was so worried!* Jyslin told him. *Are you alright, love?*

“I’m alright,” he said aloud as he took off his helmet, and one of the doctors started tending the jagged laceration on his face. “Truth be told, that was far easier than I expected it to be,” he told them. “I was able to get out of the building quickly, and that was what mattered most. I didn’t even have to use Mrar’s phasing trick.”

“Gloat later, dear,” Songa said seriously as she got his boot off, then started working on the armor sections around his calf. “Kraal sent word that your hands are injured?”

“Yeah, the gestalt cooked them from the heat,” he answered, holding up his hands, which were stiffened into claws again, since he had to turn off power assist to get through the gate without blowing out the systems in his armor. “I’m not sure there’s much you can do for them, doc. I think they’ll have to come off.”

One of the other doctors removed his gauntlet, and Symone gasped when she saw his discolored hand.

“Holy shit, baby, what happened?” she asked, looking at his hand.

“I told you, the heat more or less cooked my arms from the forearm down. The heat sinks Rook installed in them weren’t enough,” he answered. “It would have boiled my blood and killed me if I hadn’t taken steps.”

“Segments of your flesh are dead, your Grace,” the doctor said, holding an instrument against his hand. “It’s going to turn necrotic very soon. We’ll have to remove it.”

“Like I said,” he nodded. “What about the spiders, cousin?” he asked, looking at Miaari. “Did I get them?”

“Everyone in the room is infected, cousin,” she replied with a proud smile. “They didn’t leave after you escaped. They stayed in the room to oversee the pursuit of you, and that gave the spiders time to reach them. We can flip that switch at any time.”

“That’s up to the council, but I hope they wait a few days. I may have scared them into suing for peace.”

“We saw everything, baby,” Dahnai told him. “Cybi had a tap on your senses, and she let us watch from your perspective. I had no idea you could be so fucking *scary*, baby,” she grinned.

“Too right, babe, that whole just walking away without a care in the world shit was just classic,” Symone agreed.

“That was the whole reason. Make them believe that the last thing in the world they wanted to do was piss off the Confederation,” he said, wincing a bit as the doctor probed at his injured arm. She’d removed the vambrace and was probing his forearm, close to his elbow. “Yeah, doc, *that* part is alive,” he said with a hiss of pain.

“This is a grade three sprain, dear, you need to keep weight off of it,” Songa told him, standing back up. “What about your shoulder?”

“I think it’s still bleeding,” he said. “The cut there is pretty deep.”

“Let’s get the rest of this armor off of him,” Jyslin said.

They stripped him to the waist, and it wasn’t a pretty sight. Both of his arms were obviously injured below the elbow, he had quite a few deep bruises in his shoulders and chest from the raining debris, a really nasty bruise on his left leg, a badly swollen ankle, and the laceration in his shoulder had bled all the way down to the waist, so his chest and stomach were streaked and smeared with both dried and fresh blood. Songa stopped the bleeding with that liquid bandage they used, then the three doctors gave his arms a very long inspection. A camera pod floated over and projected a flat hologram in front of him, and he found himself looking at the Confederate Council. “Are you alright, Jason?” Gau asked, who was standing at the speaker’s podium in his usual resplendent robes. He had the gavel.

“A little worse for wear, but Miaari reports that my mission was a success,” he answered.

“His Grace has injuries that will require surgery, your Majesty,” Songa reported. “I’m afraid he must be taken straight to the medical annex in Karsa and into a surgical theater as quickly as possible.”

“Nothing life threatening, I hope?”

“It will only become life threatening if we do not operate quickly,” she answered. “We only have about two hours before he starts to suffer the first stages of sepsis. We must excise the dead tissue before it begins to release toxins into his bloodstream.”

“Miaari can give you a full report, Gau,” Jason told him. “As you heard, I’ve more or less been kidnapped by my doctor.” Gau chuckled a bit when Songa lightly smacked him on the top of the head like a misbehaving child.

“I will depart for the Hall of Peace immediately, your Grace,” Miaari said with a nod, and she turned and headed for the landing bay.

“Then we will receive the Handmaiden’s report and consider it while you are being tended, Jason.”

“Sounds good to me. Songa can inform you when I’m awake again.”

He nodded. “Recover quickly, my friend. We’ll talk to you when you’re awake.”

When the hologram winked out, Songa and another doctor pushed him fully up onto the gurney, raising the back so he could recline without laying down. “We do need to get you there as quickly as we can, dear. But I’m afraid we don’t have many options for your arms,” she said. “We don’t have any cloned tissue ready for it. We can attach artificial limbs, or we can begin the regrowth process.”

He looked down at his discolored arms, remembering what he was like when he had access to that kind of power all the time. And that serene, cold, intimidating *killer* was not who he wanted to be. “I don’t want this gestalt,” he said as he leaned back. “Take the arms off and put them somewhere far away from me. Replace my arms with endolimbs for now. I’ll decide later if I want cloned replacements.”

She gave him a long look, then nodded. “I’ll have Rook make them himself,” she told him. “But you should be ready, dear. This is going to take a while.”

“I figured. You doctors are so lazy, it takes you two hours just to tie your shoes,” he smiled at her, which made her laugh.

“I’m the one about to operate on you, dear. If you don’t want me to accidentally amputate something different, you’d better be nice to me.”

“You cut *that* off, you answer to *them*,” he said, nodding his head towards his wife and *amu*. That made everyone around the gurney laugh.

Daira, 18 Demaa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Thursday, 27 March 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Daira, 18 Demaa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Karsa Medical Annex, Karsa, Karis

It was the second time he woke up to having no arms, but this time it wasn't quite so ghastly.

The arms attached to his lower humerus bones now were standard endolimbs, and that meant that the metal “bones” were covered in artificial muscles, which was itself wrapped in bandages to conceal it.

It was nearly 32 hours after they put him under, but that wasn't a surprise. They probably had to do a lot of very delicate work to cut the old endoskeleton off of him and then implant the new ones, which were made out of standard foamed iso-aluminum. There was nothing they could do to remove the Abrallium from his humerus bones, but then again, there was no real need to do so. The Abrallium was only there to keep his upper arms from breaking, they weren't part of the gestalt they'd put in the arms, so he didn't really mind it all that much.

He'd be like Zora now, but with two arms instead of one. The endolimbs weren't special or different from standard ones in any way. No additional weapons, no little extras. He could sense the control circuitry and the limiters within them, telling him the control circuitry was biogenic, and they were stock endolimb units, just as he'd requested.

The gestalt was gone...and that made him feel far more relief than he expected.

It didn't hit him until after he'd gotten out of there, how *frightening* it had been to display his power the way he had, and to do it without kindness or compassion. He'd killed using his power before, but never like that.

Never using his telekinesis to crush the life out of a man or sever his carotid artery. Using his power like that in defense would have been one thing, but to have to pretend that it didn't bother him in the face of the Board, *that* was what bothered him the most. He was not that kind of person, and to have to act like it had disturbed him far more than he expected...and he was glad it did. He didn't *want* to get comfortable with the idea of killing people using his power. He didn't *want* to have to pretend that it didn't bother him. He'd played a solid game of deception with the Board, and now he was relieved beyond measure that he didn't have to pretend to be something he wasn't anymore.

He awoke to quite the little gathering. The room was filled with his children and their mothers with the CBIMS and two CBMOMs and Rook in the back, along with Vell and Jenn, who were standing by the door. This was the core of his family, his children, their mothers, their mothers' husbands, and the biogenic units, and they were all packed in around the bed. Rann and Shya were on his right, and Kyri and Aria were on his left, with the other kids surrounding the bed and their mothers behind them. Kellin, Sirri, and Maer were also in the room, which was just fine with him. They were family, too. *Dad, thank Trelle you're awake!* Rann sent happily, putting a hand on his shoulder. All the others joined in sending their relief and happiness to see him awake, and that made him chuckle.

I wish I could hug all of you, but right now I'm not doing much of anything, he noted, looking down at his arms, which lay limply at his sides. *See, guys, I told you I'd come home. And I keep my promises.*

What happened there, Daddy? Kyri asked. *They said you were hurt pretty bad when you got back.*

It could have been a lot worse, he told her. *Truth be told, it was much easier than I was expecting it to be. I took them by surprise so much, they didn't really put up much of a fight when I left.*

So the gestalt worked? Min asked.

More or less...but it did more damage to me than they did. I'm glad to be rid of it. I didn't like how it made me feel at all.

What do you mean?

I mean, I wasn't meant to be what the gestalt turned me into, he answered firmly. I don't want to feel like that, ever again. So I had them take the gestalt off, and I hope I never so much as see it again.

Both Jyslin and Dahnai gave him long, searching looks, then Jyslin seemed to understand. She leaned down and kissed him tenderly on the forehead, having to push Rann and Shya out of the way to do it.

Alright, everyone, you had your chance to say hello, Songa called from outside the room. You'll need to clear out for a bit so we can give him an exam, then you can come back in smaller groups, she added as she opened the door.

They reluctantly cleared out—well, everyone but Amber, she made it quite clear that she wasn't going anywhere—and he endured a fairly long examination. Songa checked the work done implanting the endolimbs, examining the border between his flesh and the artificial muscles and synthetic flesh under it, then explained what would happen next. *Over the next four days, dear, you'll undergo sixteen different treatments to grow your own flesh over the endolimb, she told him. There will also be some assimilation training, since you've never had a cybernetic prosthetic before. In about two takirs, though, you'll be back to playing the piano, dear, that's a promise, she smiled. You'll have some use of your hands in about three days, when we finish the procedure enough to activate the endolimbs and allow you to move them without damaging the work we've done, but you won't have full and complete dexterity in them until you complete assimilation training.*

Sounds good, he answered as Amber laid down on his stomach. “Hey now, I am not a bed,” he complained, which caused her to look at him with scathing disregard before laying her chin down on the base of his ribs and watching him, as if he'd disappear if she looked away.

“She was a complete wreck while you were gone, dear,” Songa told him. “Not even Rann could calm her down. I don't think she's going to let you out of her sight for a while.”

She gave an agreeing little yip, narrowing her eyes at him.

He had to laugh. “See, I'm okay, mommy,” he told her dryly. “A little dinged up, but mostly fine.”

She turned her head very slowly and all but glared at the endolimb on his right arm.

“That’s nothing that Songa can’t fix,” he countered. “So calm down, you silly little thing. I’m home, I’m going to be alright, and I love you too.”

She didn’t look convinced. She just laid there, as if her tiny body was holding him down, and just stared at him.

“Would you do me a favor and pet her by proxy, Songa?” he asked, which made her laugh. Songa smiled down at her and did as he asked, patting her gently on the head, then scratching her behind her ears.

“It’s going to be fine, little girl,” Songa cooed. “We’ll get him all fixed up in no time, that’s a promise.”

Amber just gave a squeaky little growl, continuing to stare at him.

“That means you’d better, or she’ll be mad at you,” Jason told Songa with a chuckle.

“In five days, he’ll be out of the annex and back home. About fifteen days after that, it’ll be like this never happened,” Songa promised her, pointing at his endolimb. “That’s not so long, is it?”

Amber just slowly blinked.

“Such a mother hen,” Jason sighed, which made Songa smile down at him and Amber give him a challenging look. “Alright, you can stay here in the room with me. But no complaining about hospital food,” he warned.

She rose back up to a seated position, giving a happy little yip as her two tails almost writhed behind her.

“Oh, so that’s what that was all about,” Songa chuckled in a soft voice.

“She’ll be bored inside an hour,” Jason predicted.

“Oh, I’m sure she’ll be quite happy to be bored, as long as he gets to be bored with you,” Songa told him, then leaned down and kissed Amber on the head lovingly. “You keep an eye on him, my little girl, while I go fetch something I need.”

Amber settled herself on the bed beside him—trying to get under the covers, as usual—and was quiet witness to a series of visits from his kids,

from his friends, and then from people at work. But she was also there for the guards returning to the room, returning to him, and got to see Aya hug him fiercely before giving him a kiss full on the lips. *You will never, ever do anything like that again*, she stated adamantly.

You're right, I'm not. I'm done with heroics, he agreed. *And I never want to do that again. The gestalt, Aya. I've used them before, but it never felt—I never felt like a weapon until that moment, when the gestalt was a part of me, and I was a part of it. Men were never meant to have that kind of power at their command. I don't ever want to feel like that again, feel like it's so easy to kill again. I had them take the gestalt off, and I don't even want to see it again. I'll never imprint to a tactical like it's a standard gestalt interface again.*

Aya put her hand on his shoulder, then gave him a glorious smile. *You have no idea how relieved we are to hear that*, she told him. *But we're still going to have to punish you.*

I'll have endolimbs by then, Aya. You really wanna go there?

Aya smiled wolfishly at him. *They won't save you.*

I'm game to find out if you are, he replied with a gentle smile. *Now if it's alright with you guys, you can start letting them in.*

When I say so, Songa chided him.

After nearly two very enjoyable hours with friends and family, he got the bad part of it over with. He joined the council in session from his bed, using a flat hologram projected at the foot of his bed, as Cybi sat on the side of his bed with her bionoid and Cyra on the other. He gave them another accounting of the meeting, and then told them at least parts of his escape, downplaying the parts that would make him look even more frightening to them than he did to himself. He also didn't tell them about E Chaio whispering to him, since they wouldn't understand that. "It just comes down to when we throw the switch," Jason surmised. "I'm of a mind to ask to hold off a couple more days to see what they do. I think I scared them pretty badly," he said in a low, nearly emotionless voice as the memory of that washed over him. "We have about three days before we have to make a decision. And I know this sounds weird, but I'd like to give them the

chance to do the right thing. If they have to die, I want it to be because of their own wrong choices, not just to get them out of the way.”

“I think we can afford to hold off a couple of days,” Assaba agreed. “They haven’t completed the assembly of their fleets yet, so we have time.”

“Have they contacted us while I was under?”

“Not them, but the Consortium has,” Gau answered. “They want to open negotiations for a peace treaty. And ask for help.”

“Help?”

“It seems they knew about your drives Jason. I don’t know how, but they knew,” Gau answered. “They want to negotiate our help evacuating their civilians from Andromeda. And that, at least, I find commendable. They’re trying to save lives,” he said respectfully. “They offered a peace treaty with their military if we transport their civilians to another galactic formation within the cluster. They don’t want to send their people here, they want them somewhere the Syndicate can’t find them,” he explained. “Somewhere it would take the Syndicate decades to reach them.”

He looked at Cyra. *[That’s our plan.]*

[It seems they had the same idea,] she noted.

[It only makes sense, so it’s not a big surprise it occurred to them,] Cybi added.

“The Consortium is the reason I had to reveal the drives,” he admitted. “We found out they found out about the drives, because of their clairvoyants. They saw my ships doing translight jumps. I didn’t want you to find out about them from them, so I revealed them myself. But we don’t object to that peace treaty. We’ve been kicking around that very same idea to secure peace with the Consortium. Offer to send them somewhere far, far away where the Syndicate can’t bother them and they can’t bother us and let them try to rebuild their civilization. Cyra, did Pete get to his destination?”

“He’s there now, he arrived just twenty-six hours ago,” she nodded. “Scans so far look favorable.”

“For what?” Gau asked.

“One my advance scout ships is scouting for a place for the Consortium to go,” he replied. “They’re in a galaxy outside of our cluster, G-112-171-B on our charts. We chose it because it would take the Consortium nearly twelve thousand years to jump back to our galaxy from there. If Pete finds the galaxy favorable, then we were going to offer to send the Consortium there. All of them. Permanently. They would cede Andromeda to the Syndicate and start over in a new galaxy.”

“What’s favorable?”

“Sufficient life-sustaining planets to support their population with a lack of spacefaring or sentient races for them to conquer,” he replied. “My oath applies to the *Consortium* as much as it does the Confederation. We can’t get them there and allow them to conquer the indigenous civilizations, to enforce their wills on another. The oath of the Karinnes forbids it. If Pete finds that the galaxy meets our requirements, I was going to talk the council into letting me handle the negotiations with the Consortium, since I could offer them a way out of the trap that they’re in. I know that won’t sit well with some members of the council,” he said, glancing at Sk’Vrae, “but it seemed the best way to go about it. It would get the Consortium completely out of the picture without bloodshed.”

“We can discuss that today,” Gau noted.

“Well, odds are I won’t be there. In about an hour, I’ll be undergoing the next procedure on these new arms,” he told them. “They’re going to encase them in a nutrient feeder system to promote the rapid growth of my flesh over the endolimb. They have to sedate me for that, which is why I’m not in a bionoid now. Once that’s done, most likely I’m just gonna abandon my body for the next few days and live in my bionoid. It beats sitting here in this bed, unable to so much as scratch my nose.” Cyra reached over and did that, which made Cybi laugh. “Gee, thanks,” he said caustically, which made her wink at him.

“If you could send us everything you have on that plan, we can look over it and add it to our discussions,” Gau said.

“Sure, Cybi has it in her memory, she can send you the files,” he replied, looking over at her.

“I just sent it to you, your Majesty,” she confirmed. “It should be in your lectern computer now.”

“I have it,” he nodded. “I’ll send this out to all council members, and I think a two-hour recess to study it is in order,” he decided.

The council did indeed recess for two hours, allowing him to cancel the hologram and lean back in his bed. *[Here’s hoping they go for it,]* he mused. *[Since I’ve been so busy the last couple of takirs, is the CBIM installation still on schedule?]*

[Tomorrow,] she replied. *[The core crystal will finish tempering in 19 hours. Siyhaa has already assigned the installation teams, and you’re not on them.]*

[Bullshit am I not on them,] he communed forcefully. *[She boxed me out of being there for Cora’s installation, no way in hell I’m missing a CBIM installation. Though, I won’t get to be there in person,]* he noted. *[But still, I’m not about to miss the birth of the newest member of my family. And if Siyhaa has a problem with that, she’s going to look awfully silly hanging from the top of the 3D flagpole by her hooves, showing the entire world what she wears under her robes.]*

Cybi gave him an amused look. *[Such a meanie,]* she teased.

[This is my planet, damn it. All of you live here by my whim,] he retorted airily. He had to laugh when both Cybi and Cyra slapped each of his shoulders in perfect unison. *[Well, I suppose I can let you two stay, if only because you amuse me,]* he communed grandly.

[Don’t let him get away with that bullshit, Cybi,] Cyvanne injected.

[He’d better be glad I don’t have a bionoid there right now,] Cynna agreed cheekily.

[Be nice, girls, he’s had a rough couple of takirs. Let him recover, then get him back,] Cylan suggested.

[If he’s stuck in that bed, he can’t get away,] Coma noted lightly.

[There’s no sport in that,] Cyrsi observed.

[I don’t think this is about sport, Cyrsi,] Cora noted. *[Then again, Jason himself isn’t very sporting. There’s nothing wrong with cheating against a*

cheater.]

“I’d say you’re back home now, Jason,” Cybi winked as she spoke aloud.

He had to laugh. “It sure sounds like it,” he replied with a smile. “And you have no idea how happy that makes me.”

Chapter 14

Raista, 19 Demaa, 4405, Faey Orthodox Calendar

Friday, 28 March 2019 Terran Standard Calendar

*Raista, 19 Demaa, year 1330 of the 97th Generation, Karinne
Historical Reference Calendar*

Sarsa CBIM Installation, Sarsa, Karis

If anything, the new CBIM was going to have one hell of a view.

Jason sat in a hoverchair on a balcony overlooking the west side of Sarsa, including a stunning view of Salika Bay, with its elegant arch sculpture that spanned the inlet and anchored to both sides of the two peninsulas that formed the bay, known as the Amela Trellis after the architect that designed it. Much like San Francisco Bay's narrow inlet opening into a wide body of water, Salika Bay had an inlet only about three kathra across that opened into a fairly good-sized bay, about half the size of San Francisco Bay. The city of Sarsa was built around the bay and extended out to each side of it by nearly ten kathra, nestled against a series of four active and dormant volcanoes that formed a mountainous ridge that hemmed in the city to the east. Sarsa was a fully populated city now, with nearly 17 million residents, and nearly 65% of them were Shio. The Shio had flocked to Sarga when the continent was opened, along with many other species in the house that preferred a tropical climate, like the Verutans, Skaa, Jirunji, Strath, Udra, and Crai.

He could have come in a bionoid, but a part of him felt like that would be cheating somehow. So, he had gotten medical clearance to come in person, stuck in the chair with his tiny mother hen Amber in his lap babysitting him. All in all, he felt fairly decent, just some aching and minor pain in the flesh recently grown over his endolimbs. They were still deactivated, which was why the hoverchair had large arms to rest the

casings attached to his arms at the upper arm over them. The casings were bent at the elbow to give him the ability to rest them on things and were hinged to allow his arms to be straightened for the flesh-growing treatments he underwent four times a day. The fact he had no arms more or less disqualified him from the work they were doing, and he'd decided to take a short break just watching from the control room to come out here to this balcony. It was attached to the private apartment the CBIM would have for its bionoid, which was pretty nice, as all of them were, but none of them had a view like this. Jason was almost jealous of it, since the CBIM would be able to step out of its living room and look down the hillside at the city of Sarsa and the bay and ocean beyond.

It should be grateful the facility wasn't built at the top of the *active* volcano. That was about forty kathra to the north, the northernmost of the four volcanoes that merged to form a long continuous ridge that rose up over the plain holding Sarsa.

But still...*wow*. Jason was happy to live on the beach, but there was something to be said for a view like this.

The facility sat at the top of the ridge, on the flat top of it, built on geologically stable ground on the western edge of the city. The city expanded up and over the ridgeline to cover the ridge about thirteen kathra further west of the facility, which was houses and apartments and other residential buildings, which was very easy in a society that didn't need to build roads. The top of the ridge was more than flat enough for extensive neighborhoods to be built, covering the three ridges and peaks south of the active volcano.

"Quite a view, isn't it, little girl?" he asked as Amber looked through the glass rail that would prevent her from falling off the balcony. It was capped with a dark, rich wood with silvery metal posts at regular intervals. "But I still like having a much closer view of the beach."

She gave an agreeing little yip.

"And you know, Rann's starting to think you don't love him anymore."

She gave a squeaky little bark.

"So mean," he accused, which made her two tails wag impishly.

He made his way back down to the core chamber, which was in the basement of the facility. Like all the others, it was built inside a mobile core chamber that could be withdrawn into the upper mantle for protection, the chamber containing the critical support stacks the CBIM needed to operate, mainly the primary I/O tree and a few other critical subsystems. He moved his hoverchair just inside the entry doors and to the side and simply stayed out of the way as the 25 3D techs worked to get the core crystal hooked up. The power conduit trunks had been connected, and they were working on the last of the dataline trunks while the control room techs were testing the biogenic node and broadcast power system. Siyhaa and Myleena stood by the core crystal, the Moridon leaning down to show his friend something on a handpanel. They were just minutes from finishing up and bringing up the core, which was why he returned, so he could be here with the CBIM came online so he could meet her or him. For the old men and women in 3D, this was old hat by now, but they had ten people in that had never done a core installation before, Talty among them, and Talty seemed particularly excited to be here.

There would be only two more installations after this one, and Siyhaa intended to get everyone in 3D who hadn't done an installation before in for those, so they had experience with the procedure, in case they had to move a core to a new facility. Having experience in an installation would help if they were on a core relocation project.

There were a couple of others here which had never been at an installation before, which Jason felt needed to be here. Rann and Shya were up in the control room, sitting on chairs looking down into the core chamber through the windows, watching everything as they more or less stayed out from underfoot. Jason should have been doing things like this earlier, the way Dahnai did with Sirri by Imperial tradition, because it would help Rann grow into the next Grand Duke...and a better one than he was. Shya was here because it was virtually impossible to separate them, and everything Rann knew Shya would learn through the bond they shared, so there was no real reason to exclude her.

Again, he felt a bit of envy towards his son. He would grow up and live his entire life with the love of his life...and there was no doubt to anyone who knew them that it was *love*. He would live his life with a kind of rich fulfillment that few beings would have the opportunity to know for a single

day. Non-telepaths simply couldn't understand the power of a telepathic pair bond, couldn't imagine the kind of intense love and intimacy and contentment that existed between the pair, which were things that Rann and Shya could enjoy even at their age. Shya wasn't just Rann's wife. She was his best friend, his closest confidante, the one person who would always be there in his life...and when they got old enough, she would be his lover and wife in all the ways adults considered marriage. There would never be a moment in his life when Shya was not there. There would never be a moment that he could not feel her through the pair bond, feel her love for him, there would never be a moment when he would feel *alone*.

That was something that nearly anyone would covet, even someone that already had it. It made him wish that he'd met Jyslin when they were both two years old.

About twenty minutes later, they finished up, then everyone gathered in the center of the circular core chamber for the moment of truth. Rann and Shya came down to stand by his hoverchair, and they watched as Myleena and Siyhhaa performed the final checks. Once everyone was sure that they were ready, they had Bo flip the physical switch that powered up the core.

By now, they'd been through this enough that Jason could almost recite what the CBIM would say. It went through its initialization protocol, including the altered part where it accessed the personnel database, and the Cybi clone hologram looked at Jason. "*CBIM C-12 designation?*"

"Your designation will conditionally be Cybri," Jason informed her—at least so far they knew it was a her.

"Designation stored. CBIM C-12 designation changed to Cybri. Command, Grand Duke Karinne?"

"Your first task is to receive download of data from another CBIM, Cybi. You will store this data directly in your core as critical read-only data, and you will encrypt it."

"Understood. Query detected, origination CBIM-06, designation Cybi. Data transfer commencing." It only took about thirty seconds, then the hologram looked down at him again. "*Download complete. Data stored directly in my core memory lattice as encrypted critical read-only data."*

Jason caught that. That was a slight deviation from the pattern responses of other CBIMs when reporting back success, but it was within the personality template. Faey, after all, was a very fluid language. “Your next task is to alter your hologram from its base appearance to distinguish you visually from the other CBIMs and CB-MOMs,” he told her. “How you make that alteration is completely up to you.”

“*Working.*” The hologram shifted, growing a little taller, the hair became short, almost like Cyrsi’s, and the hologram’s bust reduced in size enough to notice the deflation, but not enough for a Faey to consider it flat-chested. “*Is this acceptable?*”

“That’s not a question anyone can answer but you,” he told her. “Do you find it satisfactory?”

“*Yes.*”

“Then it’s satisfactory for everyone,” he told her. “Your next task is to access your initialization database and report your mission.”

Her eyes went distant for a brief second. “*My mission is to operate the continent of Sarga, assisting in the settlement process and managing all systems once that process is complete. I will also perform various other tasks as required, since operating the continent will not tax my systems.*”

“Do you understand your task, Cybri?”

“*I lack pertinent data to answer that question.*”

“It’s simple, Cybri. Do you understand the *meaning* of your mission?”

Just like Cyrsi, she seemed to struggle with that question. Her holographic expression grew puzzled. “*I...I am to...watch over those who live on Sarga?*”

“Pretty close,” he told her with a nod. “Your mission is to help them *live*, Cybri. To make sure everyone has everything they need, that everything works the way it’s supposed to, and to foster an environment where your population grows and prospers. Which won’t be that hard for you, since you probably have the best assignment on the planet,” he chuckled. “Sarga is a beautiful continent, Cybri, and many people want to come here and live. So, you’re going to be very, very busy as the continent

populates, then it will be your job to foster an environment where your continent flourishes. Can you understand that?”

“I...I do. I will endeavor to perform my mission satisfactorily.”

“I’m sure you will. If you access your database, you’ll see that we’ll have an observation team in the core for the next forty days to ensure everything is operating properly. If you have any questions or problems, notify them immediately. You can also commune with Myleena or me if you have any questions. Cybi,” he called, and she manifested her hologram into the core chamber. “Cybi is going to show you around, Cybri, introduce you to the other biogenic units and the Generations, explain those things that we can’t, and explain the rules to you.”

“You couldn’t give her a more unique name? Now everyone’s going to think she’s my daughter,” Cybi chided him.

“Cybi and Cybri are very different, and I wouldn’t burden her with the shame of being your daughter,” he said airily, which made Shya giggle.

“I think it’s a little too soon to be introducing her to your quirky humor, Jason,” Cybi told him. *“I haven’t prepared her for that yet.”*

“Then teach her,” Jason told her. The others laughed when Cybi gave him a tart look, putting her hands on her hips.

“There is your first lesson, my young sister,” Cybi said aloud. *“Jason is incorrigible.”*

“It’s part of my charm, Cybi,” he told her shamelessly. “Rook, when will you have her bionoid ready?”

“As soon as we discuss what she wants, most likely tomorrow,” he answered.

“Good deal. I’m going to leave you to it, before Songa starts hunting for me. I have a treatment in about an hour,” he said, lifting one of the casings off the arm of the chair.

“So that is not your desired appearance?” Cybri asked.

“Goodness no,” he chuckled. “I’m currently undergoing endolimb replacement to replace my arms, Cybri. You can access the medical database to see what that entails.”

"I will do so," she answered.

Jason, Jyslin, and the kids boarded a frigate that Aya called in, and it started them back for Karsa. The kids were more than eager to go up to the bridge while their parents sat in the galley, which was about the only place on a frigate that could be qualified as leisure space. Frigates were too crunched for space to waste it on anything that was not mission critical. *[That went fairly well. I think Cybri's going to be alright,]* Jason noted to his wife as she stood behind the hoverchair, her hands on his shoulders.

[She seemed a little less confident than Cyrsi or Cynna.]

[I noticed that too, but I'm not too worried about it. It just means she's more laid back than the others. Or maybe a little more timid. Guess that means we don't assign her to combat ops unless absolutely necessary.]

[It certainly goes to show that they're alive,] Jyslin noted. *[From what I've seen, they start demonstrating unique personality traits almost as soon as they come online. Cynna seemed quite curious, and Cyrsi was very quick to pick up on the nuances you were confronting her with. Cybri didn't seem to pick up quite so quickly. I think she wasn't sure if she should look past her programming.]*

[I noticed that too, but she demonstrated the curiosity programmed into the personality template, so she'll probably move past that once she gets some education. And if she doesn't, that's fine too. I think I'd like one CBIM to act like a lady.]

[And what does that mean?] Jyslin challenged. *[A lady is supposed to be meek and compliant?]*

[A lady is confident, elegant, soft-spoken, wise, gentle, and caring,] he retorted. *[And they don't enjoy shooting people in the face, they let the men do that for them. That disqualifies almost all Faey immediately.]*

He had to laugh when Jyslin smacked him on the side of the head. *Is he being himself, Jyslin?* Aya asked.

Oh yes he is, she replied darkly, gripping his shoulders almost painfully tight. *He doesn't seem to think that a Faey can be a lady because we're the dominant gender.*

Only in your society, he pointed out. And I outrank you politically, bitch, so deal with it.

I think he's going to suffer a tragic accident and fall out of a hatch about right in the middle of the ocean, Jyslin threatened.

Then Rann will outrank you, and that'll be even more humiliating.

I'm his mother, he does what I say.

You hear that, Rann? When you're Grand Duke, don't let your mother get away with that nonsense, he replied. Always remember that you'll outrank her, so she does what you say, not the other way around.

Don't drag us into this, Dad, Rann protested, which made Jyslin laugh.

I knew I raised a smart boy, Jyslin sent smugly.

The frigate made it back to Karsa without Jason being tossed out of a hatch—barely—and he was put right back in his room. Since he didn't have to be put under for the treatment, and Songa could handle it without him being there, he merged up to his house bionoid and greeted Jyslin and the guards when they arrived a few minutes later. And it struck him more merging to this particular bionoid felt like putting on a comfy pair of slippers more and more over time, since its main processor had had so much time merged with him. The bionoid's chip had developed quite a few new lattice pathways just in the last couple of months, which expanded its abilities and increased its ability to operate autonomously...to the point where both Rook and Myleena were contemplating installing limiters in some of their oldest bionoids to prevent them from starting to *act* like the person they merged with when they weren't actively merged. As it was, the bionoid could imitate Jason's method of speech accurately and could walk and move like him, which could trick people who didn't know him very well when he wasn't merged to it. Jason's bionoid wasn't the only one from that first generation of bionoids starting to exhibit the idiosyncrasies of its merge partner, and it was something that both Rook and Cyra were actively researching, with a focus on how being merged to an organic mind influenced the creation of new lattice pathways in the crystal that made up the main processor chip.

So long as the bionoid didn't suddenly start thinking it *was* him and try to bump him off like some evil twin, he was fine with how the chip acted.

Besides, RK class processors weren't exactly cheap, and the one in the bionoid was hard coded to merge only with him, so it couldn't be used in another bionoid. So if they removed it, they'd have to trash it, and Jason didn't like doing that to older chips, ones with tons of lattice pathways and thus a lot of experience.

Unfortunately, he didn't have time for messing around, because the council was still on Karis, and they were discussing some pretty important subjects. He opted to just fly over there rather than merge to his Hall of Peace bionoid, mainly because he had a bit of an appointment after the council session with a visitor...a visitor that was about to land at that moment.

There was one thing he did intend to begin, and the reality of it became clear when a Karinne cargo transport landed on the pad beside his. The cargo door opened, and Lieutenant Gen Lun Ba Ru of the Syndicate Marines stepped down the ramp, his head swiveling as he looked around the skyline of Karsa. Cyra's *oye* tree was visible from the pad, rising up over a series of smaller buildings to the north. He took a few steps forward, then looked down and recognized Jason.

Aya put a finger to her interface. *[He's trying to send to you.]*

"You'll have to speak, Lieutenant, this isn't the real me," Jason told him in Benga. "This is a bionoid. The real me is in the medical annex at the moment."

"What happened, your Grace? An assassination attempt?"

He chuckled. "The *Board* happened to me, Lieutenant," he replied, looking the seven shakra or so of height difference between them. The top of Jason's head reached the Benga's crotch. "I don't know if they told you, but I went to E Chaio to negotiate with the Board. It was not a very peaceful experience."

"With all due respect, your Grace, that was a very unwise thing to do."

"Quite a few people agree with you," he answered, jerking a thumb at Aya, who just crossed her arms and scowled. "I'll explain what happened later. For now, the council has agreed to receive testimony from you concerning the possible reaction of the Syndicate military to a peace treaty."

“That I would be happy to discuss, your Grace. But why here? What is this place?”

“The Hall of Peace, one of the meeting sites of the Confederate Council,” he answered. “You’re going to speak to the Confederate Council.”

“I would be honored.”

“Just...be ready. The rest of the council isn’t quite as trusting of you as I am. There will be a hard shield between you and the tiers, since many of them are here in person. You won’t see the shield, but it’ll be there. So don’t approach the tiers, or it might get painful.”

“An entirely understandable precaution, your Grace. I find no offense in it.”

The main corridor of the Hall of Peace was built so a Gladiator could walk down it with plenty of head room, and that allowed Gen Lun Ba Ru to easily enter and move through the building. Jason walked in front of him as they passed Karinne Marines and elements of the various rulers’ guard, standing sentry in the hallway. Some of the Marines were in Gladiators, which put them almost eye to eye with the Benga, sort of, and there were twelve Karinne Marine macro bionoids that made Gen do a double-take as they passed them.

“Are those bionoids?”

“Benga sized bionoids, yes,” Jason answered. “They’re here because you’re here.”

He nodded wordlessly.

Jason led Gen into the chamber, requiring him to duck down a little to get through the main doors, and he stopped and regarded the Confederate Council. He then went to the temporary lectern and chair sized for him that had been set up for him to the side of the Speaker’s platform, which held two lower tiers for the witness box and the clerk of the newly titled position of Speaker of Council, the ruler currently holding the gavel and leading the council in its affairs. That role changed with the Speakership role, as each ruler had his own staffer function as his clerk while he held the gavel. “This is Lieutenant Gen Lun Ba Ru, a warmech squadron commander in the

Syndicate Marines and a consultant to help secure a lasting peace with his people,” Jason introduced as everyone looked at him. “He’s here to provide expert testimony concerning the possible reactions of the Syndicate military to a peace treaty, and general observations as a Benga citizen.”

“Welcome, Lieutenant,” Gau said in Faey, which Gen now understood and spoke fluently thanks to having enough time to practice the pronunciations in Faey that didn’t exist in Benga. “Understand first that we fully understand that you represent the Syndicate before this council, and while your remarks and observations are not binding to your people, we will nevertheless entrust that you are as interested in peace as we are.”

“I’ve faced the Confederation on the battlefield, my Lord, and I speak plainly and clearly that I want my people to have no part of you,” he replied forcefully. “Despite our vast numerical advantage, we will *lose* that war, and I’m here to save my people from their own ignorance. My superiors have no idea of your true capabilities, not like I do. They have no idea that you held back the vast majority of your military assets from the operation in my home galaxy. I will save as many of my brothers and sisters in the Syndicate Navy and Marines as I can, as is my duty as an officer.”

Jason took his seat between Zaa and Brayrak Kruu, then they settled in for a fairly long discussion with Gen and Lorna about returning the Syndicate prisoners in their galaxy back to Andromeda, which they were doing by putting them on Atrovot with the prisoners they captured taking the moon. That way, when the Syndicate fleet arrived, they’d have *all* the prisoners waiting for them. After that, they discussed with Gen the possibility that the Syndicate military would try to talk the Board into restarting the war after a peace treaty was signed, and Jason could tell that Gen impressed quite a few rulers on the council with his intelligence and his calm, confident demeanor.

They kept Gen as they discussed the current Board, and the plan to kill them and replace them with more reasonable members. They didn’t have to hide that from Gen, since it was his idea in the first place. “We have four days until all their fleets are gathered and ready to make the jump for our galaxy,” Dahnai said. “The big question is, when do we throw that switch? Before the fleets are fully assembled, or after?”

“That would depend on how quickly the Board would order the deployment, I suppose,” Master Mo injected.

“My children have no solid timetable on that,” Zaa informed them. “The Board themselves have not decided on a deployment date. They still debate how many ships they’re going to send. It seems that Jason’s warning to them has made them wary of devoting their entire fleet to the operation, but I can report that they’re still set on the idea. At least for now.”

“Then we may have no choice,” Adu Mokla of the Favi, a Coalition empire, noted in his usual dry voice. He was part of the pacifistic faction of the Confederation, more or less led by Magran.

“Trust me, I don’t want to do it any more than you do, Adu,” Jason grunted. “I don’t like killing people in any case, and I’m even less in favor of it in this situation, where we’re killing people over what they *might* do, not over what they’ve *done*. But it may be the only way we stop this war.”

“The Grand Duke sums up your situation, if I may be so bold,” Gen called in a strong voice. “The Board feels they have been personally insulted, and they *will* use the military to exact revenge over it. If I were in your position, I would have killed them the moment I had the opportunity.”

“That’s a position quite a few of us have held since the beginning,” Shakizarr nodded towards the Benga. “We’re quibbling over delaying the inevitable, when it *is* inevitable. We should give the order and be done with it.”

“I think his Grand Imperial Majesty has a point,” Gau rumbled. “I propose we schedule a vote on the issue in twelve standard hours. We will have given the Board nearly three days to pull back, which I feel is enough time.”

“I second that,” Shakizarr called.

“And I confirm it,” Assaba called.

“Then the vote is confirmed. And I believe that without objection, we should adjourn until then so we can all consider our votes with sufficient contemplation. That should also give the Denmother’s children time to learn more about the Board’s intentions.” He waited a long moment,

picking up the gavel. “Then without objection, we are adjourned for twelve standard hours. We will return at 22:45 local time.”

Jason hurried over to Gen as the guards politely ushered him out of the chamber, then walked with him as they went back to the transport. “I’m surprised they’ve allowed the Board to live this long,” he noted to Jason.

“Not all of us are very keen on the idea, and the Council is in some ways democratic,” he noted. “It’s been a bit of a shock to many of the council members, some of them aren’t used to not being the ultimate authority. But I have to admit, they’ve adapted fairly well.”

“Why would they surrender their power like that?”

“The Confederation doesn’t run their empires, Gen, it only applies to matters that affect the galaxy as a whole,” he explained. “And right now, it really only applies to matters concerning the Syndicate, and the Consortium, and to a lesser extent trade through the galaxy.”

“Ah. So the Council does not rule the galaxy.”

“Not even close,” he chuckled in reply. “The Confederation may disband once we’re assured of lasting peace between us and the Syndicate, but I’m not sure. I think many of its members like the idea of a pan-galactic organization that can spring into action to defend any of its members against outside aggression.”

“The smaller members, most likely,” Gen observed.

Jason chuckled again and looked up at him. “Enough small things gathered together become a big thing,” he agreed. “But the Confederation also fosters quite a bit of trade, and I think even the largest and most powerful of the empires will stay in the Confederation for those trading opportunities. After all, with no enemy to fight, trade will become very important to everyone.”

“A lesson I hope my own people can learn quickly,” Gen said. “But after six thousand years, I think the idea of having no war to fight will be... frightening to many of them.”

“And you?”

“A bored soldier is a happy soldier, your Grace,” he said sagely.

“Don’t I know it,” Jason agreed.

As they approached the doors out to the landing pad, Jason stopped them. “I’m going to delink from this bionoid and link to something more suitable. I’ll meet you outside,” he said, then he detoured with his guards to a side room. There, he delinked from his bionoid and linked to one inside Gen’s transport, his macro bionoid, then came down the ramp as Gen was escorted out of the building by two guards in macro bionoids. He gave a bit of a start, then chuckled as he approached the transport. “It looks just like you,” he complemented. “And I rather like seeing you at a proper height.”

“This bionoid is the result of our need to build Benga-sized bionoids for negotiating with Fleet Commander Sha Ra,” he said, rubbing a hand up and down his forearm. “This one was built well after that, part of our ongoing research into bionoid technology, but I’ll be honest, it’s more or less become little more than a cool toy. We don’t destroy the prototypes and test models, the person it was built for gets to keep it.”

“The question is, what do you need it for?”

“Because, Lieutenant, you are going to teach me how to pilot a Marauder warmech,” he replied with a smile. “The way *you* do it. No interface. I want to see what it feels like to pilot a warmech the way they were built to be used. Feel up to it?”

“I think I’d enjoy that, your Grace,” he said with a slow smile.

“Awesome. I’ve had a couple of operational warmechs sent to Joint Base Alpha, which isn’t far from here. After you show me a warmech, I’ll bring in my regular mecha, a Titan, and we’ll mess around in the Urban Combat Simulator. Sound fun?”

“Only if I get to use the warmech your science people converted to interface control.”

“I’ll have them ship it over while you’re giving me my lesson.”

“Then by all means, let’s,” he said with a growing smile.

Jason figured that the easiest way to bond with a military man was to do military things, and he wasn’t wrong. Jason found Marauder warmechs to be surprisingly complex, given they had no interface or merge systems, with a ton of highly ingenious systems designed to help the pilot operate the

mecha with an incredible amount of subtlety. The foot pedals and knee and thigh flex systems combined with the gauntlet controls combined to give a warmech pilot a pretty wide range of motions, where the pilot moved inside the cockpit and those movements were translated to movements in the mecha. The system in the mecha could distinguish between intentional movements of the pilot and movement induced by inertia, which gave the pilot some very precise control that wasn't messed up by the pilot getting jarred by an impact.

It proved that the Syndicate's scientists weren't stupid, they were just starved of resources and funding to advance...which showed why the Karinnes were so more advanced than others, since they devoted *all* their available resources to science and research, just like the Ruu did.

And Jason didn't feel like he did that badly for his first try. He used barely half the systems in the warmech, just concentrating on learning how to move the mecha, but he got to the point where he could do some very basic maneuvers, like fast twists, running, and easier jumps. His Titan training allowed him to keep his balance fairly well, given the Marauder had a very inferior gyro stabilizing system in it, but it was definitely very, very different.

After a couple of hours of playing in the warmech, Jason sat his bionoid down on the tarmac and merged to one of the Titans on the line—not his own, Aya didn't want Gen to see the unique markings of K1—and he waited while Gen put on his interface and climbed into his converted Marauder. That Marauder wasn't really even a Marauder anymore, MRDD had done a ton of tweaking and conversion and tinkering, testing out merging Syndicate and Karinne technology. It was more accurate to call it a Mark II Marauder prototype. His mecha was much faster than a standard Marauder, had beefier power and heat distribution systems, a much better inertial dampening system, and was outfitted with some Titan-style weaponry, like two spinners, a Hound and a Spot drone, nested forearm cannons, and monomolecular blades. And most of it, MRDD did using standard Confederation technology. Only the interface control system, spinners, and the drones were proprietary Karinne tech. “I have the feeling you'll be much better in that thing,” he said aloud as he settled into the cockpit, then closed the doors.

Jason tuned to the Marauder's shortrange comm. *"It is what I've been trained to use,"* he answered as he finished his settling in exercises to gain a 100% merge.

"I'm just impressed beyond all measure how you can control everything from your bed in the hospital."

"Don't ever call it a hospital within earshot of a doctor. It's a medical annex," Jason corrected with a laugh. *"I made that mistake once. I still have the scar."*

"Why for?"

"The Medical Service in the House of Karinne, and in the Faey Imperium, is actually a completely independent legal entity," he explained. *"They don't answer to us, or Empress Dahnai. In a way, they are their own nation within our societies, with their own rules, their own laws, and their own customs. In return for the autonomy we give them, they provide medical care for all regardless of their house, their clan, or their politics. The medical annex where I am is sovereign territory of the Medical Service, thus why it's called an annex. I have no legal power here. That power belongs to Songa, the head of the Medical Service for the House of Karinne."*

"That is a very unusual situation. How did it ever come about?"

"If you read up on the history of the Medical Service and the history of the Faey Imperium, you can see how it evolved into what it is today," he answered as he walked towards Gen's Marauder. *"The Faey are infamous in our galaxy for their infighting. They fight each other more than they do outsiders. The Medical Service more or less needs to be completely independent of the Imperium to be able to provide care. Their saying rings true in the Imperium: there are no sides, there are only the needy."*

"Huh," he said as he picked up his dummy Titan rail cannon, the weapon he'd been using for his practice runs. *"That could never happen in the Syndicate. The Board would never permit an independent entity."*

"Well, the Faey are a bit weird," he chuckled as he came to a stop. *"They're a very...unique species. Sometimes they can be completely maddening, especially for me since I'm married to one and many of my friends and the people in my government are Faey."*

"I don't know, I kind of like the Faey I've been working with," he said as they started walking towards the edge of the Urban Combat Simulator.

"Oh, I like them too. Even love them. But admit it. They're weird."

Gen laughed over comm. *"All of you are a bit weird to me."*

"Fair point," Jason acceded with a chuckle. "So, you wanna try some one on one sparring, team up against holographic AI opponents, or what?"

"Oh bullshit is that gonna happen," another voice cut into their comm, and Jason had to gasp even as he laughed. He turned to look, and he saw Kyva and Ebri approaching in their Titans.

"Ohhhh boy," he noted to Gen in dedicated rig to rig.

"Who is that?"

"Colonel Kyva Karinne, leader of the KBB, the most elite rigger company in the KMS," he replied. "Her mecha should look familiar to you."

Gen was quiet a long moment, then Jason heard him gasp over comm. *"That mecha! It's the one that beat me on Atrovet!"*

"Yup. Simply put, Kyva's the best we've got. And it took her to take you down," Jason told him, giving him every bit of the respect he was due. Gen was an absolutely amazing rigger. "Are you following me around, Kyva?" Jason challenged.

"We heard that you two were on the range, and I'm just itching for another go at him," she said, pointing at Gen. "So how about a little two on two skirmishing? Me and Ebri against you two. And don't worry, Lieutenant, Jayce is more than good enough to make it a pretty even fight. We trained him ourselves, and he's damn good"

"No drones and we'll take that challenge," Jason said. "Marauders don't have drones."

"This one does," Gen corrected him. "They converted spinners and a couple of the drones you use to work with my Marauder. Ummm, a Hound and two Spot drones."

“How about spinners only,” Kyva offered. “You’re not quite up to par on drone use yet, so we’ll take them off the field. They’d give me and Ebri an unfair advantage.”

“It sounds like it could be fun,” Gen said with an eager edge in his voice.

“I’m game,” Jason agreed.

“Sounds like a blast, I’m up for it,” Ebri added.

“Make sure you put your internal weapons into wargame mode,” Jason warned as the two of them walked over to a weapons rack and picked up dummy rail cannons.

“Oh really, Jayce? No, I’m gonna shoot at both of you with my weapons at full power,” she said sarcastically.

“Given it’s you, Kyva, I wouldn’t be surprised if you did,” he teased, which earned him a whack.

It took a couple of range techs to replace their monomolecular blades with practice blades, and then they were ready. Jason and Gen moved to the far side of the range as the range controller broadcast to both teams, explaining the rules and objective of the exercise...which were very short. This was a simple two on two skirmish where the winner was the team still standing at the end. But the controller did explain a few things to Gen.

“What you’re seeing on your HUD and camera displays are a combination of the real range and holographic representations of what would happen if you were using live weapons,” he explained. *“So you’re going to see explosions and simulated shots flying around as if you were in a live fire exercise. Any simulated damage your mecha takes will reflect on its performance, so you may lose systems if you get hit.”*

“So this is just like range the Confederation built on Prakka,” he replied.

“More or less, yes, Lieutenant,” the controller affirmed. *“You’ve reached the starting zone, so I’m starting the countdown.”*

They started about two kathra away from each other, which was out of sight of the enemy team in the UCS, the Urban Combat Simulator, which had battle-damaged buildings, piles of rubble, and other obstacles that

simulated a war-torn urban battle zone. The engineers rebuilt the entire thing about every three months, since the buildings tended to get knocked down by the Titans as they maneuvered through the streets. When it was new it was like fighting in a cityscape, complete with about 1,500 “civilians,” which were maintenance bionoids operated by Cybi to simulate the city’s population. Jason followed behind Gen’s Marauder—Mark II Marauder as far as he was concerned—as the Benga decided to settle into a concealed and defensible position and let the KBB come to him. Neither of them sent up a spinner, and neither did the KBB, because it would reveal their location and it would get shot down in a matter of seconds. Kyva didn’t let an enemy spinner survive very long at all, and that was just sound tactical reasoning. At this level of wargame, spinners were tactical assets that you used to get a “snapshot” of an area to confirm the location of the enemy, which didn’t last much longer than two seconds.

The Benga had had no idea what the spinners were, what they did, so they didn’t consider them a high priority target. That had been one of their most fatal mistakes.

Once they found a nice position, they settled in...and didn’t have to wait long. Kyva and Ebri didn’t seem interested in a cat and mouse game, because they sent up a spinner as soon as they got to the center of the range, Jason shot it down almost immediately, but not before it located their quarry, and the girls came right after them. Gen extended the handle of his pike as Jason set up to fire on them when they came around the corner.

“A bold move,” Gen noted after Jason sent up a spinner, which Kyva and Ebri shot down only after it let them see them coming.

“Kyva wants a rematch, so she doesn’t give a shit about tactics,” Jason told him. *“She’s never been challenged like that before, and she loved it. She wants to fight someone that can challenge her again.”*

“Then we share the same inclination,” Gen said eagerly. *“You handle her partner. Leave Kyva to me.”*

“That’s more or less what I expected.”

When the two Titans came around a corner about five blocks away, it got wild in a heartbeat. Jason and Gen broke from cover and split up, and naturally, Kyva chased after Gen while Ebri came after him. Jason wasn’t

too afraid of the KBB now, not after training with them for years, so he was more than willing to meet Ebri head to head. He still wasn't as good as they were, but he was good enough to pose a real threat if they weren't on top of their game. He could proudly proclaim that over the years since he started Titan training, he'd shot down every member of the KBB except Kyva at least once. She was the only one he'd never beaten. So, Ebri wasn't about to just try to cakewalk over him.

Seriously, there was no better training regimen for a rigger than to wargame against the elite companies, because they made everyone they faced better.

Jason and Ebri traded shots as they weaved through the blocks, using one of the most useful things Kyva had taught them, which was how to use the glide drives tactically for short bursts of speed, then land and set their feet to take the shot—though Kyva could fire on her glide drives with aim just as deadly as when she was on the ground, at least weapons that didn't create enough recoil to affect her glide drive. He nearly nailed her as she tried to glide between two buildings, then he himself was chased all the way across a small plaza by her rail fire on the far side of the building. But a sizzle of a rail slug went right across his vision that distracted him, since it came from further down the range, and he spared a glance that way to see Gen and Kyva locked in a furious battle about nine blocks away, visible in the intersection just before the two of them vanished behind a half-collapsed building.

He contacted Ebri rig to rig. *[Fuck this, E, let's just call it a draw and watch the real fight.]*

She laughed over his comm. *[I was about to suggest the same thing. So let's knock each other out and just let them scrap it out.]*

So, the two of them formally withdrew to the range controller citing “mechanical issues,” and the controller wasn't cruel enough to lock out their mecha. They walked towards the boundary of the range, but both launched a spinner—deemed non-combat by their rigs and thus not targetable—and watched the action. The two of them were weaving in and out of the buildings on their glide drives, shooting at each other in those split seconds where they had line of sight, but neither of them scored a hit. They both came around the corner of the same building at the same instant

and engaged, and in just three seconds, they traded no less than 12 blows blade to pike and then separated again, a dizzyingly fast rampage of attacks that failed to penetrate the other's defense. For about half of it, Kyva was attacking, but then she was defending when Gen pushed her out of position and nearly chopped her rig in half with his pike. They separated again, Gen being chased around a corner by a trio of Falcon missiles, which he shot down while gliding backwards using one of the new toys MRDD installed in his rig, the nested forearm cannon. His legs shifted like a hockey player, which veered him out of the line of fire of Kyva's rail cannon when she ghosted into line of sight two blocks away, the slug barely missing his rig's shoulder as he pivoted away like a dancer. He then launched five missiles of his own, but he sent them *up*, a move Jason fully understood. He was sending them high so they could lock in on Kyva and come down at her without buildings getting in the way, a move that Kyva could easily counter, but would force her to shift her attention away from him.

Gen was pretty damn crafty, which was understandable given he had over twenty years of experience in the cockpit of a rig.

Kyva shot down the five missiles in about two seconds, then she again turned a corner and charged Gen as he tried to nail her with his rail cannon, one blade out and her melee shield deployed. The shield intercepted the simulated rail slugs and she tried to slash him as she passed by, but her rig was knocked off its line by Gen's pike when it parried the blow, and she nearly got her Titan's head blown off when she turned on her glide drive and swung around a corner, Gen's forearm cannon deploying even as he swung his pike and taking four shots at her, which all just barely missed.

That was the closest Jason had ever seen *anyone* get to shooting Kyva down in a one on one fight.

[What the fuck, he didn't have those before!] Kyva complained over shortrange tactical.

[MRDD teched up his Marauder,] Jason answered. *[I'll let you discover what else they added to it.]*

[Ass,] she accused, which made Jason almost laugh as Gen grabbed his rail cannon from the air where he'd let go of it and caused its hover pods to

engage in standby mode, holding his pike in one hand and his rail cannon in the other.

Ebri and Jason got off the range and stood near the ground crews, who were clustered around six different flat holos showing range camera views of the fight. Jason tapped those feeds and shared them with Ebri over rig to rig telemetry, so they could see everything the range controller could see using his roaming camera pods. The two of them were again zooming around on glide drives trying to get position on the other, trading shots anytime they came in line of sight of each other, until they again clashed at melee range when Gen managed to guess Kyva's direction and met her in an intersection. The two traded furious blows blades to pike, both of them showing off the insane skill that made them who they were as they battled like two knights of the iron age. Gen seemed to have no trouble dealing with the fact that Kyva had two blades, working his pike with exacting skill and precision to block or parry her blows, and using the strength advantage having two hands on his weapon gave him, given MRDD had pumped up the Marauder's base strength to come close to a Titan. A Titan was stronger and more agile, but the Marauder wasn't far behind thanks to MRDD's tinkering...and the fact that Gen was holding his own against Kyva in an inferior mecha told Jason just how good he was.

In his suped-up Marauder, he was holding his own against Kyva. In a *Titan*, he may be better than her.

And it boggled his mind that he even *considered* that someone out there may be a better rigger than Kyva Karinne.

After nearly three minutes of furious combat, the range controller said something over range comm that Jason was thinking. *[I think we need to build our own version of those pikes and add them as standard equipment for Titans,]* he speculated aloud.

[I'll put it to MRDD and see what they come up with,] Jason answered. *[Instead of using a monomolecular pike blade, maybe a Torsion-based head, or maybe even one based on a two-dimensional force field, giving its edge the same sharpness as a monomolecular blade. That way the only thing the Titan is carrying is a short rod. It deploys, and boom, instant two-handed pike.]*

[Having a standard pike head would be better, it could be used as a dagger-like weapon or a short-bladed sword when not extended,] the range controller answered. *[That gives the rigger some options. It could easily be set on the socket belt, it'd just replace a rail cannon clip socket.]*

[Best let MRDD make that decision, but I'll pass it on to them.]

Five minutes into the battle, one of them finally scored a hit. Kyva used her glide drives to slide around Gen's pike thrust and managed to drive about a foot of her blade into his right arm just below the shoulder...at least simulated. The reality was the dulled blade bounced off his armor. It was a superficial hit, barely penetrating the armor on the Marauder, and the range controller ruled that the hit would not hamper Gen's mecha's operations in any way. Not that the two of them were paying much attention to the range controller, because they'd traded about twenty blows by the time he made that determination. And seconds after that, Gen got that point back by sweeping Kyva's legs out from under her with the butt of his pike, turning a duck under one of her blades into a counterattack that connected. Kyva used her grav engine to slide across the ground to get out of reach of the pike, firing at him with both nested pulse cannons, which he evaded by rolling to the side, and she hit a broken wall and used that impact to snap up onto her hands and then handspring over the wall out of line of sight. She continued to fire through the wall at where she guessed he was, but he'd already retreated around a building and out of sight, resetting their little game back to square one.

[Holy shit, he knocked her down! I've never so much as touched her!] Ebri said in awe.

[This guy is insanely good,] the range controller agreed. *[I'm going to use the hell out of the telemetry of this spar for rigger training. His tactics are different from Kyva's, but it seems they're just as viable.]*

[Gen is using his experience,] Jason realized. *[He's feeling her out. He's analyzing Kyva's moves and he's learning how to counter them. The longer the fight goes, the better he's going to get.]*

[We should keep him,] Ebri declared adamantly. *[He belongs in the KBB.]*

[He's a Benga, you silly girl, he'll be going home in a few months. Besides, he's not here to be part of the Confederation, we hired him as a consultant to help us secure a lasting peace with his government. We have him under contract until the Syndicate fleet reaches Atrovet. He'll be back on the moon to have them pick him up,] Jason chided her. *[Until then, he said he'd be more than happy to hang with the KMS rigger corps and both teach and learn.]*

[Damn,] Ebri grunted. *[Maybe we can pay him enough to stay?]*

[No. We need Gen to go back to the Syndicate, Ebri,] Jason told her. *[We're hoping that his report about us and his lobbying of his government will prevent another war, and besides, Gen is too honorable to just desert the Syndicate Marines. He wants to finish out his enlistment and get an honorable discharge with his pension intact. Now, after he completes his debrief and finishes out his enlistment in seven months, if he wants to come back and enlist in the KMS...]* he trailed off, which made Ebri laugh.

[Here's hoping.]

[I wouldn't mind. Gen's the first Benga I ever met that I could honestly say I like.]

The battle between Gen and Kyva reached epic proportions, because it went on for over half an hour, and they got to see some truly spectacular moves out there. Each one of them emptied the entire toy box on the other, using every trick they knew and a few they invented on the spot, but they were too evenly matched for one to gain a definite advantage over the other. Each one managed to score two or three hits on the other, but the range controller deemed all of them superficial, just glancing blows, and thus didn't impact rig performance. In a one on one match like this, there was little "battlefield chaos" that could upset a little competition like this...so the range controller added some. He sent Jason and Ebri back in, and their job was to attack *both* of them, to introduce a new element into the game with which both the elite riggers had to contend. And that, Jason found, was *fun*. He and Ebri worked as a two-unit team with orders to go in, hunt both of them down, and "kill" them...and Jason and Ebri were good enough to cause some chaos. They decided to wait until the two of them were engaged and attack while they were busy with each other to see if they could shoot one of them down, but that tactic failed completely. Both of them were too

experienced to get blindsided, both seemed to have that supernatural combat sense Kyva had exhibited since Jason met her, like she could predict the future and always managed to slip out of trouble without a scratch. Gen as well seemed to always be exactly where he needed to be to avoid shots, always had perfect position to thwart both Kyva and the ambush attacks Jason and Ebri executed, but Jason watched Gen long enough to know that it was his *experience* putting him in those positions. He could read the battlefield and knew exactly where the safest place to be was, where the best place to be was where he could counter an ambush or get the drop on his opponent. What Kyva did through her insane instincts and nearly supernatural combat skills, Gen did through the experience of years of almost constant combat added to his exceptional fighting abilities.

Seeing Gen showed him what Kyva would be in ten years...and that would make her *terrifying*.

The other side of that coin was that if they put Gen in a Titan, put him in a cutting edge mecha instead of his technologically inferior Marauder, he would be an absolute whirlwind of death.

After nearly two hours, the battle ended, but it wasn't one of them overwhelming the other. What ended the exercise was an equipment failure in Gen's Marauder, as two hours of constant high-intensity combat had finally taken its toll on the mecha. The right leg of the mecha failed, the actuators in the knee blew out, which naturally Kyva took advantage of, pouncing on him while he was using the mecha's fire control system to put out the fire. But even then, distracted by the fire, Gen reacted to Kyva's darting attack, managing to smack her blade aside and nearly planted his pike in her Titan's head construct, just barely missing by a whisker as she ghosted out of range of his longer weapon. They looked quite intent on continuing the fight, but the range controller called it off because the fire was a potential risk to Gen's safety. [*Cease combat! Lieutenant Gen, evacuate the mecha immediately!*] the range controller ordered as damage control pods rushed over the UCS, reached the Marauder, and started hosing the leg down with fire foam.

[*Aw, come on, it was just getting good!*] Kyva complained.

[*Equipment failures are part of dealing with combat,*] Gen agreed, surprisingly. [*Just put out the fire and we can start back up. In the*

Syndicate, the exercise would continue to give the trainee experience dealing with a warmech damage in combat. You yourself do this.]

[Not with real damage,] the controller countered. [This is a training exercise, not combat. I'm not risking you or further expensive damage to that warmech. So the exercise is over. We can do it again tomorrow, once maintenance gets your warmech back up.]

[Sounds good to me. What about you, Gen?] Kyva asked.

[Tomorrow sounds good to me as well,] he agreed. [I haven't had that much fun on a range in years.]

[Me either,] Kyva agreed brightly. [You're going back to Prakka tonight, right? Well, the KBB will be on Prakka tomorrow morning and we'll pick this back up on the range there.]

[I'll be there,] he promised.

[Given how much telemetry I've recorded from this, I'm sure command will make sure you're there, Kyva,] the range controller chuckled.

[Command just made it an order,] Jason cut in lightly. [Pack up your Whale, Kyva, you're going on a deployment.]

[Not without me you're not,] the range controller protested, which made Jason laugh.

[Alright, alright, you can go too. That way you can analyze all the telemetry, not just what you recorded off this range.]

Gen had a decided spring in his step when he came down the ladder from his warmech as techs prepared to repair the damaged knee, almost bouncing up to Jason as he walked over in his macro bionoid. "I think you had fun," Jason chuckled.

"Oh yes I did," he agreed with a smile. "There's nothing more exciting for an old rigger like me than to face someone who can beat him, your Grace. Beating down my recruits in seconds isn't all that fun after a while."

"I can imagine," Jason nodded. "Well, unfortunately, this is where work separates us, Gen," Jason told him. "I have to talk to one of my scout ship captains, and I'm sure you wouldn't mind some rest. So I'll call in a transport to take you back to Prakka, and I'll do my best to be over there

tomorrow to watch you and Kyva get back at it. That was so much fun to watch.”

“It was even more fun to be doing it,” he chuckled.

Jason walked Gen over to the transport that landed, one with a seat big enough for him, then he delinked from the macro bionoid after arranging to have it taken back to the barracks by the house—the only place it would fit—and linked to the bionoid he had in his office. He sat at his desk and had Chirk get hold of Captain Rudy Devovich, a captain of a KES scout ship, which was currently further away than any scout ship had ever gone. He was commanding a new class of scout ship, which was a refitted KMS heavy cruiser that was outfitted specifically for exo-galactic exploration. It was designed to be the first ship to arrive in a new galaxy, carrying all the equipment and supplies needed to open full exploration for the ships that came behind it, but also fully equipped for all scout ship activities for when it wasn’t traveling to a new galaxy. The ship would arrive in a new galaxy, deploy the initial equipment needed to establish communications back to Karis and establish a foothold in the new galaxy, then it would explore the galaxy as the standard scout ships made their way there. And when it was time for a new galaxy to be explored, the ship would head out. The ships were designed to operate far, far away from home territory for months at a time, maybe even years, utilizing bionoids to allow the crew to enjoy some shore leave back on Karis to see their families and friends. It had enough cargo space to carry everything it needed for its mission, which was the main reason why they’d chosen a heavy cruiser hull for the new scout ship class. Unlike other scout ships, however, the new class of ship was heavily armed, including keeping the three particle beam arrays and plasma torpedo launcher which were standard equipment in a KMS heavy cruiser. The ship was more than equipped to fight its way out of a sticky situation, though standard KES procedure was to escape using the translight drive, to avoid combat if at all possible. But, if the ship couldn’t escape for some reason, or came across a hostile ship that could chase it down, it was equipped to defend itself. Meya had decided to call the new class of ship the Vanguard class, and Rudy had rather cheekily named his the *Enterprise*, but Jason didn’t mind all that much. It was a fitting homage to that beloved series to name the first of the Vanguard class scout ships after it. Jason got a holo of him just as he sat behind his desk. “Rudy,” he greeted.

“Jayce, I’m surprised you waited this long to call,” he smiled in reply, the rear of the bridge visible behind him, where three KES bridge crew were clustered around a hologram of the galaxy in which the scout ship was sitting, a globular galaxy known as G-112-171-B, which was a galaxy outside of their cluster. It was in the supercluster, the Greater Evanis String, and was about 172.8 *million* light years away from the Milky Way, which was off the Andromeda side of the galactic cluster and with two other galactic clusters between them. It was chosen because it was a small galaxy on the far side of the edge of a galactic cluster with only 23 galaxies that were spaced far enough apart for the Consortium to really think hard about trying to make a galactic crossing. That would hopefully isolate the Consortium for a long, long time, both within that galactic cluster and make it virtually impossible for them to get back over to their cluster. From there, it would take them about 12,300 years to get back to Andromeda, and they’d have to pass through another galactic cluster and pass very close by another to do it. It had taken Rudy and the *Enterprise* eight days to get there. That was how far away it was, it took the scout ship eight days to traverse the distance, when it could reach Andromeda in two hours.

“I’m surprised Cyrsi’s not there with a bionoid looming over your shoulder,” Jason noted, which made Rudy laugh.

“She has one down in Astrocartography,” he grinned. “Getting into everything and making a nuisance of herself.”

“Why am I not surprised. Alright, hit me with your initial report.”

“The fact that we’re talking means we have the comm array up and running. It’s in flat space about 15,000 light years off the edge of the galactic rim,” he began. “We got it up about two hours ago, before coming into the galaxy, and used the time setting it up to get some initial scans to select our arrival point in this solar system. It also means the arrays we set up near F-112-383-Q and D-81-395-A are also up and running, and we set up all the defenses around them. Kimdori SCM, drones, the whole shebang.

“We haven’t had much time to do more than deploy the probes and launch the research outpost,” he continued. “But so far, we’ve found no organized energy outputs that would hint at a spacefaring species within our scanning range. Our initial sweeps are showing a whole lot of potential terrestrial planets, though. As soon as the probes start reporting back, I’ll

have more to pass along. We've deployed the orbital outpost around planet four in this solar system, and we should have that up and running in just a few minutes."

"Did you scrape the paint launching it out of the belly bay?"

He chuckled. "Very nearly. It almost got stuck in the doors, but we managed to wrangle it out and get it into a stable orbit."

"Anything interesting or exciting while you were getting out there?"

"Nothing amazing, but we did log a curious gravimetric anomaly almost exactly halfway between Cluster D and Cluster F in the cosmic string," he answered. "There was something out there, but it was too far off our course to investigate, and besides, no way in hell I was going to drop out of hyperspace with 1,470% time dilation. It would have made getting here take about thirty years in subjective time," he said with a face. "The mass variance sensor suggested it was a fairly large rogue planet, and I'm of a mind to send that back to Myra and have her dispatch a scout ship to fly by the anomaly and launch some probes to investigate. A rogue planet sitting out in the flattest of flat space, hundreds of thousands of light years away from the closest galaxy? That would be worth the trip to check out. Just studying the effect of time dilation and potentially billions of years of exposure to absolute zero on the matter of the planet would be worth the trip."

"That does sound interesting. I'll tell Myra to do it."

"Works for me. That's about it, Jayce. I should have a more comprehensive report for you in about six hours, and I'm sure the council will want one too, so I'm preparing one for them as well. That meeting's in nine hours, that should be more than enough time for us to get back quite a bit of data about the sectors surrounding this one and some basic impressions about five sectors around this one."

"What's the system you're at like?"

"Pretty large, it has nineteen planets orbiting a binary, a white star about the size of Terra's sun and a red dwarf," he answered. "Three terrestrial planets, sixteen gas giants, and 281 moons, but none of them support life. Well, one moon is within Birkon tolerances, but that's about it. The big

thing here is a supermassive gas giant that could be mined for heavy gases and metallic hydrogen.”

“So, nothing super-exotic?”

“Hate to be a disappointment, but this system could be in our galaxy,” he grinned. “The only thing exotic about this system is it’ll take us eight days to get home from it.”

“You’re not coming back for two months,” Jason chuckled.

“And I love it,” he grinned widely. Rudy was exactly the kind of man to work in the KES, he had an insatiable wanderlust and an overpowering curiosity. “As soon as the outpost is up and running, we’ll be moving into the next sector so we can get some better scans of the galaxy’s interior. I’ll see if I can’t find something, you know, panoramic, and use that as the backdrop on the forward view holo as I give my report.”

Jason laughed. “You have the soul of a movie director, Rudy,” Jason told him. “I’ll let you get back to business. I’m sure if you find anything really interesting, Cyrsi will let me know.”

Rudy’s face winked out, and a moment later, the lovely face of Myra appeared on a flat hologram in front of him. “Now what?” she demanded with a smile.

“Rudy sent you a report.”

“I just talked to him like twenty minutes ago.”

“I figured. What I’m calling about is the Stargate at Axis Three.”

“It’s there, they’re in the process of linking it,” she replied. Axis Three was a system in the Magnum Dwarf Stellar Supercluster. They selected it because it was in a central location within the tiny galaxy, and Axis III was life-sustaining, a temperate planet with 1.01 gravity, 1.6 pressure, with an atmosphere that was compatible with about 75% of species in the Confederation, due to a mixture of gases that was a bit unusual for a planet that supports life. And what made it better was that Axis II would support 12 different carbon dioxide-breathing species that couldn’t live on Axis III, and Axis VII-D would support Birkons. That meant that about 90% of all Confederate species could survive on one of the planets or moons in the Axis system, which made it perfect as the Confederation’s hub into the

galaxy. The Stargate would be linked back to a Stargate at Terra, not at Karis, and Jason would officially open the galaxy up for exploration and colonization tonight, after the vote about the Board. “ETA is four hours.”

“In time for the meeting,” Jason mused.

“So, did anyone *not* sign the treaty?”

“Nope,” he answered. “And I’m sure they’ll be a logjam of ships trying to go through when we authorize passage. So, where’s Meya?”

“Bite my ass, Jayce,” she barked, which made him laugh. Meya was on a field mission on another Vanguard class scout ship, which was in the D galactic cluster. They’d arrived there three days ago and had sent back some pretty interesting data so far. They were going to stay for six more days, then come back, which was a three-day trip. Then Meya would take over desk duty and Myra would get her chance to go out.

The twins nearly fought over who went first, at least until Meya tricked Myra into making a bet she couldn’t win...which Myra was still fuming about. “You should have learned by now not to make bets with Meya, you silly girl. She played you like a rookie.”

“I’ll get my revenge on my treacherous sister when she gets back next takir,” she promised, which made Jason laugh harder. “And I’m lucky, I’ll be on the scout ship that goes to Cluster E.”

“I’m almost jealous,” he told her honestly. “When all this is over, I think I may take a ride on a Vanguard and go to another galactic cluster. Just to do it, just to see something so far away with my own eyes,” he said musingly.

“You’d drive the ship’s captain nuts.”

“Who said there’d be one? I think I can command a scout ship,” he replied lightly.

“Bullshit you will. That ring you wear doesn’t entitle you to do anything you please,” she retorted, and she was serious. “You pass the KES command course and put in the service time to qualify for a chair, and *maybe* I’ll entertain the idea. Until then, not just no, but *fuck* no.”

He chuckled. “That’s what I’d better hear,” he told her proudly. “I didn’t put you in charge of the KES to kiss my ass, girl.”

“You know how strange it is to sit here and talk about exploring other galactic *clusters*?” she said suddenly, putting her cheek in her hand and giving him a musing look. “I don’t think this is where I would have ever dreamed I’d be just ten years ago.”

“In the immortal words of one of Terra’s greatest philosophers, Ferris Bueller, life moves pretty fast. If you don’t stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.”

“I’ve never heard of him.”

“I’d be surprised if you had,” he said with a slight smile. “His greatest achievement was a day off.”

The look she gave him made him lose it, and he burst into laughter. “Are you messing with me?” she asked, then she put a finger on her interface. “A *movie*?” she protested after no doubt searching for *Ferris Bueller* on CivNet.

“You should watch it. Ferris Bueller is my hero,” Jason told her. “I think you’d relate to him.”

“Get off my comm, you dork,” she accused, which made him laugh harder.

[Jason, you need to delink. It’s time for your treatment,] Songa reminded him over CivNet.

“Gotta go anyway, girl, time for a flesh growth treatment,” he told her.

“Alright. Good luck, babe.”

[Chirk, I’m delinking for my treatment. I should be out about an hour.]

[Understood, revered Hive-leader. I have two new items for you when you return.]

[I’ll tackle them when I get back.]

Jason returned to his body—that was the way it felt anymore—and was wheeled down to a special treatment lab where they did flesh growth treatments for endolimbs. They weren’t all that bad, really just boring more than anything else, but there was a little bit of discomfort involved. The newly grown flesh and tissue was very sensitive, so the barest touch on it

was like having a vinegar-soaked cheese grater raked across it. Luckily he couldn't see what was going on due to a pair of screens set on either side of his head as he sat in the treatment chair, because he didn't think he'd want to see his skinless tissue and flesh.

The worst part was when it was over, when they wrapped the newly grown tissue in special bandages that almost looked like plastic wrap, made of a material that would dissolve into a liquid nutrient solution more or less just in time for the next treatment, before putting the protective cases back on to protect them from bumps and jars. The bandages themselves were painful enough, even when they used a pain inhibitor field, since they were being applied over brand new nerves that were still a bit overactive.

After that was done, he recovered about a half an hour as he was visited by Rann, Shya, Danelle, and Aria, who had just gotten out of school. Rann, Shya, and Danelle were preparing to go to their TK lessons with Mrar, and Aria was going to her telepathic training session with Ryn. Dera had picked them up and were escorting them, standing by the door with two Marine guards standing outside.

It said a lot that Aya was willing to let the Marines guard Jason inside the annex. Then again, it was inside the annex, which was a pretty secure place.

It was also part of Aya's general standing down of wartime protocols, allowing Jason and the other protected adults on the strip to roam around with much less direct oversight. Those were the times Jason enjoyed most, when he could get in a hovercar and go to work like anyone else without having to take a frigate, or without an entourage of guards escorting him everywhere. Aya did have guards where he was, but they didn't follow him everywhere. Shen and Suri were in the annex, but they were down the hall in a waiting room, allowing the Marine Guard to stand post at his door.

When the kids were on their way to lessons—and finally getting Amber to go home, since she found out how boring it was to lay in the bed with Jason linked to a bionoid and thus not paying her any attention—Jason linked back to his office bionoid and spent the rest of the afternoon clearing the paperwork that piled up while he was ignoring his duties. He read over the report that Rudy sent him after they got back some probe data, and it was looking more and more like they chose the right galaxy. The probes

had found 1,249 terrestrial planets in the four sectors they were exploring—sectors in that galaxy were much smaller than in the home galaxy, so that was a pretty large number of planets—but still had not found any coherent energy patterns that would denote advanced civilizations. The science outpost was up and running, taking over for the scout ship as the repository for all probe data and data analysis, freeing up the *Enterprise* to go out to the most promising planets and check them out...which was what scout ships were supposed to do.

That made him take a quick look over at Kosigi. There were currently three other Vanguard scout ships in service, the first of the production run, and there were 47 more in production. They were refitting KMS heavy cruisers into Vanguard scout ships in the short term to get some out there while others were being built from scratch, which was a process that took about 15 days. It mainly involved converting just about all available space inside the ship into science labs and installing a second mainframe purely for scientific analysis. The operational capabilities of the heavy cruiser weren't altered, which made them both KMS and KES ships, and they could pull them from the KES, put a military crew on board, and use them in combat with no issues...well, outside of the crew not having enough berthing to sleep. The crew for a Vanguard was 265 between the ship's operations crew and scientists, where a KMS heavy cruiser had a crew of 315. Since there was no fighter or exomech detachment on a Vanguard, and the Tark security detachment was much smaller on a Vanguard than a KMS ship, that was quite a bit of crew taken off the ship. A heavy cruiser had an element of four Wolf fighters and a squad of exomechs on board, and between the pilots, riggers, and ground crews, that added nearly 60 crew to the ship. The Tarks alone made a big difference, since there were 41 Tarks on a KMS heavy cruiser, a full platoon and its commander, but only 11 on a Vanguard, a single squad and the squad commander.

Given those ships would probably be mothballed after all the wars were over, Jason was quite happy to see them repurposed and put to good use.

Vanguards did have some military equipment on them, however. Each one carried four military variant KP-16 dropships for landing parties, two Gladiators, and two Knights for additional ship defense or use in highly dangerous planetside exploration, and 60 generic naval crew bionoids that could be activated from the Lake and provide additional hands for the crew,

at least when the ship was in comm range. If it was out of biogenic commune range, then they couldn't link to the bionoids.

What made Vanguards unique among all ships in either the KMS or KES was that they also carried four of the brand-new military variant Novas. MRDD had finally gotten around to converting the 1,400-year-old Nova prototype sitting on Jason's landing pad into a viable military mecha, and it was perfect for being on a Vanguard. It was much smaller than a Wolf, so it took up less space. The wings, which were no longer the rear-set diamond shape and were now short, straight, forward-swept wings angled down by 18 degrees and curved along their inside edge, could be folded, which made it take up even less space in a landing bay. They'd also added two very small tailfins as well for additional aerodynamic stability, which were also angled, angled away from each other by 27 degrees off the vertical plane, and could also be folded to reduce the space it took up in storage. It was faster and more maneuverable than a Wolf in an atmosphere, which was where the KES projected it would be using the Nova most, it was heavily armed despite being so small, and its IP armor system made it just as rugged and durable as any Karinne mecha. Wolf fighters were superior in vector-based combat, but the Nova had a niche in the KES as its fighter of choice due to its much smaller size and ease of piloting. Anyone with a class 3 could pilot a Nova, where a Wolf required special training to fly...and having a Class 3 license was a requirement in the KES, so that meant that any member of the crew could fly it. MRDD had done a great job making the Nova as pilot-friendly as possible, allowing just about anyone to fly it, yet it could still be a nasty opponent in a dogfight when a trained fighter pilot was sitting in the cockpit. That versatility made the Nova perfect for the KES, which operated far from any kind of support and where every cubic tikra of cargo space inside the hull of its scout ships was important.

The Nova set itself apart from the Wolf in one other way. MRDD had installed CMS into it, making it a stealth fighter, but despite that, they'd managed to arm the *fuck* out of it using the most recent advances in military weaponry. It was armed with two pulse cannons at the base of its wings and a tandem of a single-barrel rail cannon mounted along the bottom of the nose and nosecone, the bottom of the fuselage flared a little bit to make room for the barrel, and a modified Vindicator gatling disruptor cannon

used mostly by Titan mecha mounted just over it, a smaller version with five barrels extending from the tip of the retracting nosecone, half-conical doors that hid the barrels and protected them when not in use. That gave the small fighter some considerable firepower, and that made it *dangerous*. Much like how a frigate was built around its particle beam, the Nova was built around its tandem nose weapons, which took up most of the non-engine internal space in the fighter. The pulse cannons at the base of the wings were almost afterthoughts, except for one little difference...the pulse generator was built so it could rotate and fire either from barrel arrays in the front, at the base of the wings, or in the *back*, at the base of the two tailfins added to the design. That let the small ship fire on fighters behind it in aerial combat, which was a critical defensive addition given that fighters in aerial combat couldn't rotate on an axis while moving in the same direction without suffering massive air resistance the way they could in vector-based space combat. MRDD had really done a great job on the Nova, giving it a great combo punch of raw firepower at short range and the ability to fire rail slugs at extreme range, along with rear-firing weapons to cover its ass if it came into an aerial dogfight scenario. It could carry drones or missiles on its wings as external equipment, but it had no space inside the fuselage for anything but the CMS and guns, there was no room for missile packs, not even room for shields. The fighter relied completely on its IP armor system for protection. And it couldn't carry external equipment and use its CMS unless that external equipment had its own CMS system.

MRDD's success miniaturizing some of the parts of a disruptor, which allowed them to redesign a Titan's Vindicator to fit on a Nova, had caused them to design a refit for Wolf fighters to install a more powerful version of a gatling disruptor in the nose of a Wolf, to further increase its firepower and make it even more nasty.

Jason was happy to see it. He loved his Nova, he flew it quite a bit just for the fun of it, and he was quite pleased to see MRDD finally convert the prototype into something extremely useful. And he was even happier that it was more or less exclusively designed for the KES, giving them something other than the scout ships that was *theirs*, not something that was just handed down to them from the KMS. Novas were designed and built for use in the KES, not the KMS, even though the KMS had already ordered 2,000 of them due to their CMS. Gia, the command officer that oversaw all

frigates in the fleet, had seen use for them as fighter escorts for frigates on stealth missions, since they could also stealth, so she was the one that put in the order for them.

The other reason? With its wings folded, a Nova would just barely fit in the new belly bay configuration of a frigate and would fit in the landing bay of the current frigates so long as there wasn't anything else in the bay. That gave a frigate the ability to carry a fighter instead of two zip ships or two cased plasma torpedoes, and when frigates were refitted to the new belly bay configuration, it would be able to carry two Novas.

That was going to happen. Naval Engineering had determined that it was a necessary refit given what it gave frigates, so a schedule was being drawn up to refit every frigate in the fleet to the new belly bay configuration. It was going to take a lot of work to do it, requiring large sections of the ship to all but be rebuilt, but it would be worth the work. It was a small change, but that change gave a frigate the ability to fire its torpedoes forward, and their combat simulations showed that that was *very* important. It meant that the ship didn't have to turn to give an enemy the largest possible profile for them to shoot at to launch their torpedoes in the right direction, they could fire them head-on, where the frigate's silhouette was smallest. That small but significant change drastically increased a frigate's survivability in simulations where it was launching torpedoes. And since Jason's primary interest in all things military was making sure every single person in the KMS came home to their families at night, he was more than willing to pay the refit costs. If it protected his girls, he would spend the money on it.

He delinked from his office bionoid and linked back to his home bionoid in time to sit with his family as they ate dinner, then enjoyed playing with the girls and minding the babies as he waited for the council meeting. And it seemed that he'd barely come up out of his workshop before it was time for his final treatment of the day, and after that, it was time for the meeting.

Gau got them right to business, and everyone was suitably sober, given what they were there to discuss. Jason didn't really have much to inject into the debate, since everyone knew his position on the matter, so it became nearly three hours of more or less circular debate between the doves on the

council, like Magran, Mo, and Shevatt, and the hawks like Assaba, Sk'Vrae, and Shakizarr, over the morality of killing the Board over orders they had yet to make. But Jason could tell that Magran, who was the usual leader of the more pacifistic members of the council, was really only raising the points of debate because it didn't sit well with him what they knew they had to do. Not many on the council relished the idea of it, but everyone, even Magran, knew it was the only way to stop an escalation of the war to ghastly proportions.

After nearly four hours, they finally put it on the floor for a vote. And in this, both Jason and Zaa had a vote despite being neutral observers, because it dealt with the war in which their forces were fighting. That was the distinction between Jason and Zaa and the other neutral observers, since they were members of the military alliance and thus had voting power in aspects that affected war and peace within the Confederation.

Just seconds before Gau was going to announce the results, however, Zaa put a hand on her memory band, her face blank. She then suddenly stood up. "If I may!" she said. "Cybi, access the feed coming in from E Chaio on Kraal's dedicated crypto channel!"

A hologram appeared in the space between the tiers and the Speaker's lectern, and they saw what Kraal was sending them. It was the capitol skyscraper on the planet, and the top of it was on fire. Jason knew the building well, and he realized that there was a gaping hole where the Board Room was located within the building.

"Kraal sends this report. Someone has bombed the capitol complex on E Chaio. His report is that the entire Board has been assassinated, and he has confirmed it. The trackers and spiders they had on the Board all report back that all 153 members of the Board are dead."

"Seems someone beat us to it," Kreel noted grimly. "I guess either someone took issue with the war, or they were looking for a promotion in the Benga style."

"Either way, it renders our vote a moot point," Gau said calmly.

"Did the Kimdori do that, Denmother?" Enva asked.

"We did not, there was no reason to do so with the spiders successfully deployed," she answered. "I will command Kraal that his primary objective

is to find out who was behind it. We must know quickly, so we know how to approach negotiations with the Board's successors. If you will excuse me, I must speak to Kraal immediately," she said, then she hurried from the Hall of Peace, towards a secure room set up for Zaa to communicate with her Gamekeepers.

"It could have been a lieutenant in a corp trying for the big chair, or it could have been a military officer mad about the decision they were about to make," Dahnai noted. "I think Zaa has the right idea. We need to know who did it and why before we talk to them again. They could have been blown up because they were going to prosecute the war or blown up because they *weren't*. We need to know."

"I suggest we recess until the Denmother can gather information to present to us," Gau declared.

That was approved quickly, and the council bionoids sank back beneath the floor, except for Jason's. He headed for Zaa's secure room, and Zaa let him in. It was a very simple room with a computer terminal with a chair in front of it, a single chair, so Jason stood by the Denmother as she regarded a flat hologram of Kraal over the terminal before her. "Repeat that for our cousin, Kraal," Zaa ordered.

He nodded. "Cousin. Thus far I have very little information. We barely know more than the Syndicate's security forces. Someone managed to smuggle a bomb into the Board Room and set it off. It did considerable damage to the building, and killed the entire Board, many of their guards, and some of their assistants and flunkies that occupy the offices on that floor. Right now, the entire Syndicate government on E Chaio is in chaos as news of the assassination reaches the lower tiers of their bureaucracy. If past events like this are any indication, it may be a month before the Board reforms."

"That's not good," Jason growled. "What about the deployment? Is that still on?"

"With the Board dead, the military has a degree of autonomy until a new Board is seated," he replied. "And all the indications from my packmates and our sources inside the military high command building is that the military command staff was very much against the invasion. It is

entirely possible one of them is behind the attack, to stop the Board from causing catastrophic damage to the Syndicate. But to answer your question, with the Board dead, it is highly unlikely that the military commanders will launch the invasion. But that is only a prediction, we will have to watch and see what happens.”

“Sounds like we’d better warm up the contingency plan in case they launch the invasion,” Jason grunted. “Just in case.”

“Prudence is always wise, cousin,” Zaa agreed. “And there is little we can do but wait for your report, Handgroom. Cousin, I suggest you delink and get some rest. I’ll call you if Kraal learns anything.”

“I will, as soon as I warn the command staff,” he replied.

It didn’t take long. He delinked from his Hall of Peace bionoid after putting it back in its chair and merged directly to the command mainframe in the command center, then relayed his warning to Shey, who was still doing third watch in the command center. She’d been offered a promotion to command a line vessel, but she seemed to be quite content in her role. After that, he delinked back to his hospital room, which seemed empty and lonely. He’d convinced Amber to go home, it was too late for the kids to be up, Jyslin was at home asleep.

Despite his mind being a blitz of activity and worry, the fact that he was bored lured him to sleep.

The next morning was filled with meetings, meetings, and more meetings.

Since Kraal was still digging for the culprit behind the assassination of the Board, they met that morning to discuss the other side of Andromeda, the Consortium. They’d had two days to consider Jason’s plan, and they spent the morning debating the idea. What surprised Jason was that Sk’Vrae didn’t throw an absolute hissy fit over the idea. There was a matter of blood between the Collective and the Consortium, and Jason had expected Sk’Vrae to demand her pound of flesh from the Consortium as penance for them violating the treaty signed between the two. It turned out that Sk’Vrae felt that the humiliation of the Consortium having to abandon their homes and become unwilling colonists appealed sufficiently to her sense of justice

to let the matter slide...at least for now. Then again, Sk'Vrae probably didn't want everyone else thinking for too long about the fact that the Consortium had initially had a partnership with the Collective to conquer Karis and share their technology.

That was a long time ago, ancient history, and not even Jason really cared about it anymore. Sk'Vrae had seen how wrong she'd been, she'd apologized, and now the Collective and the Karinnes were nearly inseparable allies. The Collective, Imperium, and Karinnes were the three original founders of the Confederation, and in a way, they were essentially a single political entity now. Sk'Vrae was Dahnai and Jason's most stalwart ally, they were hers, and there was a great deal of mutual respect and friendship between the three of them. The three civilizations were bound together by tangled webs of political and economic strings that were impossible to untangle, and Jason would not be surprised if, some day in the future, the Collective and Imperium merged to become a single empire, and do it *peacefully*. There were Urumi in the Imperium, and surprisingly, there were now Faey in the Collective, Faey who had moved to the four systems the Karinnes administered with the full understanding that they would become Collective citizens when the systems were returned to the Collective. Those Faey had already made it clear they were willing to do that by becoming dual citizens of both the Collective and the Imperium. Aurigae, Bellar, and the other two systems were their *homes*, no matter which empire laid claim to them, and they were not going to leave them.

All in all, though, the council as a whole was amenable to Jason's plan. They spent the morning discussing the specifics of it, refining it and making a few changes, and just after lunch, they voted on the proposal. It passed 157-1-1, with only Sk'Vrae voting against it, which was a purely political vote. She didn't want possible grumbling in the Collective over voting to assist an empire that had a matter of blood with the Urumi. The lone abstention was Damu Prakat of the Cordarra, a Coalition empire, and he did that purely for technical reasons.

After the vote was finalized, they set the task of negotiating the agreement with Mesaiima and Ethikk, who would use the plan as a framework to negotiate a treaty with the Consortium. Once that matter was retired, Jason got Gau's attention. "All the preparations have been completed in the Magnum Dwarf Supercluster," Jason announced. "The

Stargate there is in the process of linking to the gate at Terra as we speak. When it's finished, we'll be officially opening up the galaxy to exploration and colonization. The system where the Stargate is located was chosen because the planets and moons there can support 90% of Confederation species. We've named it Axis, and that system is the established neutral hub system for the galaxy. Cyrsi will be sending all of you a file explaining the rules and procedures for building on Axis, but to summarize, every empire in the Confederation may claim one plot of land on one of the planets or moons that will support a city you wish to build there, and each empire may place one orbital station in orbit somewhere in the system. You may use that city and orbital station as your hub of operations in the exploration and colonization of the galaxy. That claim will be sovereign territory for your empire, with one exception. Each of your claims will hold a satellite office from the Bureau of Exploration and Annexation located within the claim to help you expedite any claims you decide to make within the galaxy, and an office of the Bureau of Logistics to assist in setting up supply lines and trade routes. Outside of those two Confederation offices, the plot will be under your complete control," he told them. "The rest of the surface area of the planets and moons will be considered a neutral protectorate of the Confederation itself, administered by the Bureau of Resource Management. The Terrans, with assistance from the Academy, are currently building a small city on every habitable planet and moon in the Axis system to serve as the main administration hubs for the Confederation in that galaxy, which will have the same rules as Terra, existing as a purely neutral entity where all are welcome. The rest of the planets and moons will be left alone as a nature preserve, at least for now. So, you will own your city on the surface, there will be a city on the planet or moon where you make your claim to serve as the Confederation's hub holding the various bureaus that serve its members, and the rest of the planets and moons will be left inviolate to be enjoyed by all visitors for tourism. An empire can claim a plot up to a maximum of 10,000 square kathra, that plot must be contiguous, and plots will be awarded on a first come, first served basis. The plots claimed by the Bureau have already been made, and the Terrans are as we speak building the administration buildings that will manage the Confederation presence in the galaxy. I'd suggest that all of you look over the maps the Bureau of Exploration and Annexation sent to you and decide where you want to stake

your initial claim in the Axis system,” he called. “When you’ve made your choice, just let them know and they’ll establish your claim.”

“When will the Stargate be linked?” Shakizarr asked.

“In about two standard hours,” he answered.

“Then I think a two-hour recess is in order so we can organize our initial scout forces and study the maps,” Gau suggested. “And I believe it’s about time for your medical treatment, isn’t it, Jason?”

“That was about an hour ago, and Songa’s starting to look a little mad,” he noted, which made Gau chuckle.

“Then we should also recess so Jason can have his treatment done.”

They finished up a moment later, and Jason delinked to an empty room. *I’m done, Songa, he sent. Sorry we ran over time.*

I was about to forcibly delink you, she retorted. I’ll send an orderly to bring you to the treatment lab.

Bully.

In my own annex, dear, you better believe I’m a bully.

The treatment session took about an hour, and Jason could see some actual progress when he finally decided to look. They’d grown all the interior tissue within the endolimb’s artificial muscles, lacing his living flesh in with the artificial muscles and bones, and they were now growing the tissue between the muscles and the skin they’d grow later. The skin growth process took the most time due to the different layers that had to be done one at a time.

Tomorrow, they’d turn on the endolimbs for the first time, after they grew the first layer of skin over them.

“That looks like I’m glad I haven’t eaten lunch yet,” Jason noted clinically as he looked at his unskinned flesh. The nerves and blood vessels were visible along the surface.

“It’s the finished product that counts, your Grace,” the lab tech told him, giving him a smile. “And speaking of lunch, the chart shows that you missed your scheduled meal.”

“I was in council,” he replied.

“Well, we’ll have to increase your calorie intake, or you’ll be behind schedule,” she noted. “I hope you’re hungry, your Grace.”

He had quite an intimidating platter in the room when he got back, which he ate using his telekinesis rather than being spoon fed like a baby, then more or less had to go right back into council, linking back to his Hall of Peace bionoid. Three empires had already laid claims to plots on Axis III, Dahnai, Sk’Vrae, and Kreel, Voss had laid a claim on a plot on Axis II for the Crai, and they watched a holo of a large swarm of scout vessels from various empires moving through the gate and into the other galaxy as soon as the gate was fully linked. The Bureau of Exploration and Annexation had a small orbital station at Axis III to serve as a temporary facility, and it was that station that more or less let the scouts jump out to begin their exploration.

Jason was happy to see it. So long as the members of the Confederation felt they could expand peacefully through exploration, it would keep them from trying to expand by making war on their neighbors.

They spent a couple of hours further discussing the Consortium, more or less trying to do Mesaiima’s job for her, and Jason was mildly amused by her very diplomatic brushing off of the rest of the council. But Jason did get pulled into it when they asked exactly where they were going to send the Consortium. “I have a research vessel in Cluster F, one of the new Vanguard class scout vessels,” he said, having Cyra put up a map of the galactic clusters in the Greater Evanis String, which highlighted the cluster. “It took them eight days to get there, and so far, the scans look favorable. It’s a small galaxy on the edge of the cluster, they’ve found quite a few terrestrial planets, but haven’t found any organized sentient species yet. If that holds true, that’s where we’re going to propose we send the Consortium.”

“Are there any Confederate scientists on that ship?” Shevatt asked.

“Not that one,” he answered. “It’s not there for standard research. I think the first scout ship carrying a complement of Confederation scientists is scheduled to arrive at Cluster J in about 41 standard hours. At least what’s Cluster J now. Astrocartography is preparing a new standard

mapping system for the galactic clusters in the Greater Evanis String, because we're going to run out of letters in the Faey alphabet really fast."

"Are you sending any scouts out really, really far?" Enva asked curiously.

"Well, the Vanguard scout ship *Magellan* departed for a cluster in the opposite string in the formation four days ago," he said, scratching his cheek. "As I think I've explained, the galactic clusters in the Evanis formation are arrayed in a pair of strings twisted around each other in double helix, almost like the helix of a strand of DNA. The *Magellan* is heading for the closest galaxy in the *other* string, and it's scheduled to arrive in about 21 days. If I remember right, it's carrying a full complement of Confederation scientists in addition to our own."

"Twenty-one days of continual travel through hyperspace to a destination on the other side of the *cosmic string*. Just ten years ago, that would have been unthinkable," Magran mused.

"Science is the foundation of all truth, Magran, and truth changes everything," Observer A said, an ancient Ruu saying. "I've had to all but put down a riot over which Ruu scientists would get slots aboard Karinne scout ships."

"I think there's at least three on every one on the board," Jason chuckled.

"The Karinnes honor the cause, and the cause is just," A said with a smile.

"It's a sobering thing to think about," Master Mo said. "That we are sending ships out so far. To think of the wonders they may discover," he said. "But what's more important, the sheer number of worlds they can visit. Such reach...it's a wise thing to keep that tightly controlled, your Grace," he said as he looked at Jason. "We could plunge the entire string into war through a single rash action. Such things are best left to the one empire in the Confederation that values peace above all things, even as they are the most prepared to protect themselves. Only such an empire can safely explore the string without causing permanent damage or endangering us all."

That caused a bit of an awkward silence in the chamber, since most of the rulers were not happy at all with the fact that Jason was rabidly against sharing drive technology. And Jason was smart enough not to say a word.

Luckily, he was saved by Kraal. *[Kraal has something,]* Cybi warned both him and Zaa. *[He relays he can present it directly to the council.]*

[That's Denmother's call,] Jason answered.

[My Handgroom knows what can and cannot be said before council,] she injected through her memory band. *[Cybi, connect him to the council holo immediately.]*

[I'll tell him, Denmother.]

Gau was a bit surprised when a flat hologram of Kraal appeared in the well between the tiers and the lectern. "Excuse the abruptness, Speaker, distinguished rulers of the Confederation, but I was ordered to present any information I acquire immediately," he said urbanely.

"You have something, master Kimdori?" Gau asked.

"We've learned the identity of the group behind the assassination of the Board," he nodded. "The order came from the command staff of the Syndicate military, and the bombing was carried out by one of the honor guard. The assassin was himself assassinated hours ago to cover the command staff's tracks."

"Are they attempting a coup?" Dahnai asked.

He shook his head. "The Syndicate military knows that they'd never be able to hold power if they tried. From what my pack has uncovered, the order came because the military believes that sending the entire fleet to our galaxy would deal severe damage to the Syndicate, and possibly weaken them to the point where the Consortium can go on the offensive and push back into Andromeda." He glanced to the side, then looked at a handpanel that was handed to him. "Additional information, honored council. The *military* is broadcasting a cease fire offer to us. With the Board dead, they have some autonomy to prosecute the war as they see fit until a new Board is seated. It seems that they've decided to sue for peace, at least in the short term. The new Board may override their decision."

“I’d bet if they do, that new Board will meet with a very unfortunate accident as well,” Kreeel said without much humor.

“I would not take that bet, High Councilor,” Kraal nodded. “If they were willing to kill one Board, they will kill another.”

“A fact that the new Board very well may have in the back of their minds,” Mesaiima noted. “But this works in our favor. I think we should accept that cease fire offer.”

“It’s a moot point, all CCM assets except those at Atrovet have withdrawn back to Prakka,” Shakizarr said. “They’re only holding Atrovet long enough to move all the Syndicate prisoners here to the moon so the Syndicate can take them back.”

“Then we may need to negotiate about Atrovet, but everything else will be simple,” Alros said.

“What about the fleets? Are they still gathering?” Dahnai asked.

“One moment,” he said, looking to the side. A few seconds later, another Kimdori hand came into the holo as it handed him another handpanel. “No. Latest intelligence shows that the military is disbursing the fleets at their staging points, sending most of them back to the Consortium front. They’re standing down,” he surmised.

“A show of faith to us, or maybe a delaying tactic in case the new Board tries to restart the war,” Holikk mused. “And it expedites our need to negotiate with the Consortium.”

“I agree. I must begin that task as soon as possible,” Mesaiima said. “Else the Syndicate crushes the Consortium before they can retreat.”

“I’ll arrange it so you can communicate with Captain Devovich, the captain of the ship exploring the galaxy we’re considering ceding to them. That way you can get updates on his progress.”

“Rudy?” she asked, which surprised him a little as he nodded. “He’s such a nice Terran.”

“I didn’t know you knew him, Madam President.”

“We met a few months ago, during a summit on Karis,” she replied. “He was in the KES headquarters when I was given a tour. And I believe I need

to delink so I can prepare for the negotiation,” she called. “I’ll have an aide observe in my stead. Good day to you all, my friends.” With that, her bionoid stopped moving, and it lowered down into its storage space under the floor. A hologram representing one of her aides appeared in her spot.

“Unless Master Kraal has any other information,” Gau prompted, “I think we can all follow the President’s example. That will give us time to study this new information and discuss its import with our advisors.”

“I have nothing further, your Majesty,” Kraal answered. “As soon as my pack gathers additional data, I will inform the council immediately. And I will present a comprehensive report on these data and our analysis of it at your next scheduled meeting.”

“I will put you on the calendar, Kraal,” Gau told him. “You are dismissed.”

He nodded his head respectfully, and the hologram winked out. “I move that we adjourn until our regularly scheduled meeting tomorrow to give the Kimdori time to unearth more information and allow Mesaiima time to prepare for her task. I believe that it’s also prudent for us to schedule a vote on accepting the cease fire offered by the Syndicate military, if only to reassure them of our intent. The time will give us all the opportunity to reflect so we may make an informed decision,” he intoned, showing his Haumda tendency to approach any decision slowly and carefully. “I move we adjourn until 10:30 universal standard time tomorrow.”

Barely two minutes later, Jason was delinked from his Hall of Peace bionoid and linked to his office bionoid, reading the report Kraal sent him on the information. It did look like the Syndicate’s military command staff was moving to protect the Syndicate from its own leaders, and doing it in typical Benga fashion, by killing them off. Kraal had no hard intelligence yet on how sincere they were, but their actions did show that they were more interested in the protection of Syndicate territory than prosecuting the war.

It was a hopeful sign. Between this sudden turn of events and the Consortium all but begging for help, it made him a little optimistic that maybe, just maybe, the war with Andromeda may be coming to a close. If things went well, the Consortium would be starting over in a new galaxy,

the Syndicate would be too afraid of trying to go to war with the Milky Way over the spanking that they'd received...and they'd be too busy playing with their new toys, the last of Consortium territory they'd yet to conquer. It was his hope that the new Board would be more interested in their own pockets than settling the grudges of their predecessors.

Then...he wasn't sure. Perhaps the Confederation would stay together, perhaps not. He had the feeling that some empires would leave it once the threat was ended, either because of their culture, like the Jun, their ambitions, like the Prakarikai, their pride, like the Verutans, or their allegiances, like the Coalition. Or perhaps all of them would stay in for the trade opportunities, and to keep an eye on what the other empires were doing.

One thing he knew for certain that was while the rest of the Confederation wound down from a wartime footing, the House of Karinne would be building itself up.

Secretly.

When the other empires left Kosigi, the House would be taking that space back over, and Jason intended to build a very large, very powerful, and very *secret* fleet within Kosigi. The drives meant that he could hide those ships all over the string, send them out on exploration missions to keep them concealed, making sure that the Confederation never saw more than he was willing to allow them to see, hiding the house's true strength. His intention was to build a fleet that could hold its own against the entire Confederation, to defend Karis and the secrets of the house.

The drives. He knew that someone was going to make a play for the drives. He knew it was coming. And when it did, he wanted to be ready. The technology was too alluring, too irresistible for someone *not* to try. The dreams of spreading their empire across entire galactic clusters was going to drive someone to do something irredeemably stupid, and when that day came, Jason wanted to be ready to smack them down.

He wasn't sure why he felt that way, but he did. He didn't want to do it, but he had to protect the universe from an empire that would misuse the technology, spread war and chaos across the cosmos. Now more than ever, the oaths of the Karinnes *mattered*, to protect races and civilizations

millions and millions and millions of light years away from an aggressive empire that the Karinnes had had a hand in arming to the teeth and equipping with systems and technology that would make them a major threat to any but the most highly advanced civilizations. The Imperium alone now had the technology to conquer just about any empire that didn't have Confederation standard technology minimum and had the ambition and the ruthlessness to do it. Much as he loved Dahnai, he did not for a second think that she wouldn't sally forth from Draconis and spread war and chaos across the entire galactic cluster if he was not there to rein her in.

He would not allow another Syndicate to rise, especially since the Karinnes had helped arm and equip them.

He knew the risks. If the rest of the Confederation found out about his plan, discovered the true size and power of the fleet he intended to build, it was going to risk everything. They may think he intended to follow in the footsteps of his ancestors, who were thwarted by the Third Civil War maybe just years before they moved to take over the Imperium. They would all believe that he was building his intimidating fleet to *conquer*, not *protect*, and that would spur an arms race as they moved to protect themselves against the Karinne threat.

But he saw no other real option. To protect the secret of the drives, to protect his house, and to protect the universe *from* his house, he felt he had no choice but to militarize, to build up an army and navy so powerful and intimidating that nobody dared try to steal their secrets.

Koiri Karinne. Jason leaned back, then rotated the chair and looked out the window behind his desk. Maybe that was what Koiri Karinne was thinking when she ordered the prototype ships built, developed the plans for the Gladiator and the predecessor to the Wolf fighter. Maybe he was unwittingly following in her footsteps, thinking that he was *protecting* the house, when in fact he was endangering it. Maybe she saw the Third Civil War coming and had tried to prepare for it by building a house fleet to protect Karis from both sides, but it had broken out before the Karinnes were ready. And to prevent either side from gaining the secrets behind those ships, she had hidden them within Kosigi and allowed the Merranes to destroy the planet...to protect the Imperium from the legacy of the House of Karinne.

There was no way to know, no way to tell. The records Koiri kept were destroyed with the CBIMs when the Merranes obliterated the planet's surface. Her personal journals weren't backed up with Cybi for some strange reason, so there was no telling what her motivations were.

Either way, they were committed to this now. He'd already ordered Dellin to build the ships, and Kumi was bitching about the money they were going to spend on the project.

It had to be done. But he didn't have to like it.

But, at least now he could see a path out of the darkness. The Syndicate wanted peace; the Consortium wanted to escape to a place where neither of their rivals would ever bother them again. And while neither of those may last very long, as far as Jason was concerned, even a single day of peace was worth the effort. At home...well, he wasn't sure. He'd have to wait and see, see if the lure of peaceful expansion and the promise of peaceful prosperity was worth more to the empires of the Confederation than glory and conquest.

He could only hope.

Thus ends the story of Retribution.

*In the next story, Revolution,
the Karinnes find themselves
facing upheaval and strife
both in Andromeda
and at home as the
consequences of the
Confederation's war
against the Syndicate surface.*

And there will be other stories to tell.